

# ***Auftragstaktik*: The Basis for Modern Military Command?**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

*AUFTRAGSTAKTIK: THE BASIS FOR MODERN MILITARY COMMAND?* by Major Michael John Gunther, Army, 61 pages.

Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the Prussian General Staff during the Franco-Prussian War, defined *Auftragstaktik* as the actions a subordinate took in the absence of orders that supported the senior commander's intent. The use of mission tactics allowed subordinate commanders like Crown Prince Frederick Karl, Gen. Konstantin von Alvensleben, and Gen. Karl von Steinmetz to interpret how best to achieve the commander's intent based upon their understanding of the tactical situation. The Prussian use of decentralized command during the Franco-Prussian War acknowledged the risk inherent in this system of command. Despite what modern military theorists often write, *Auftragstaktik* and mission command are not synonymous terms. Most authors ignore the historical environment that the Prussian military operated in during the Franco-Prussian War. This study examines the influence of the Prussian concept of *Auftragstaktik* on the modern US Army notion of mission command as defined within the published doctrine. It utilizes archival records and pertinent published histories from the August 1870 battles on the Franco-Prussian frontier, Moltke's 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*, as well as writings from the 1980s to describe the influence of Prussian system on the modern concept of mission command.

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## ACRONYMS

ADP	Army Doctrine Pamphlet
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
Brig. Gen.	Brigadier General
Capt.	Captain
Col.	Colonel
FM	Field Manual
Gen.	General
Lt.	Lieutenant
Lt. Col.	Lieutenant Colonel
Lt. Gen.	Lieutenant General
Maj.	Major
Maj. Gen.	Major General
MMW	<i>Moltkes Militärische Werke</i> (Moltke's Military Works)
St.	Saint

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## ***Auftragstaktik*: The Basis for Modern Military Command?**

Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff<sup>1</sup> from 1857 until his retirement in 1888, often related a story to junior members of his staff that described the essence of the German system of command. Following a battle, Prince Frederick Karl took a major aside and proceeded to reprimand the young officer for a tactical mistake. The major responded that he was following an order issued to him from a superior officer, which constituted the word of the king himself. The prince responded in kind, ““His Majesty made you a major because he believed you would know when not to obey his orders.””<sup>2</sup> The story illustrated the extent to which Germans adopted mission-oriented command during Moltke’s tenure, as no less a leader than a Hohenzollern prince informed a subordinate commander that he could disobey orders when the situation called for it. This new system of command, eventually referred to as *Auftragstaktik*<sup>3</sup>, allowed subordinate leaders independence to interpret the situation and execute actions that fulfilled the commander’s intent rather than the letter of the order.

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<sup>1</sup>On 18 January 1871, the heads of various German states met in the Versailles Palace’s Hall of Mirrors outside of Paris to sign a treaty acknowledging the creation of the *Kaiserreich*. The *Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches* (Constitution of the German People) fundamentally changed the way people in the twenty-five German states defined themselves. For the first time, citizens were considered German, rather than Saxon, Württemberger, or Prussian. As such, it is appropriate to use the term Prussian to define those portions of the army that belonged to the Kingdom of Prussia prior to 18 January 1871 to include leaders, doctrine, and government positions. If a unit or commander came from a state other than Prussia, they are identified by the state. For those events that take place after German unification, the terms, positions, and doctrine are defined as German. For example, Gen. Helmuth von Moltke was the Chief of the Prussian General Staff at the beginning of the war, but he was the Chief of the German General Staff at the end of the war. For simplicity, if a term applies to both the period before and after unification, the term German is used.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (Garden City, NY: Military Book Club, 1977), 116.

<sup>3</sup>This paper is written from the German perspective; whenever possible the German names and translations are preserved. During the Franco-Prussian War, both the French and Prussian armies used their own names for battles, towns, and geographic locations. Wherever possible, the locations are identified using the name and spelling used by the German General Staff used in the official history, *The Franco-Prussian War 1870-71*. Lastly in the German language nouns, like *Auftragstaktik* and *Junker*, are always capitalized.

The Prussians, and later the Germans, developed this system of command during the mid-nineteenth century Wars of German Unification. In August 1870, the Prussians defeated Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's Army of the Rhine in a series of battles that eventually contributed to the fall of the French Second Empire. Although French units had several material advantages over the Prussians, their commanders failed to notice a fundamental change in how the Prussians commanded and controlled their units after the 1866 Austro-Prussian War. Prussian commanders had instituted decentralized command and control in the pursuit of a singular military objective. This method of command often resulted in units entering the battle in a haphazard method during the war's early campaigns; however, they ultimately won the battles.

Although the modern German *Bundeswehr* continues to use Moltke's system of command, other armies have been reluctant to adopt a decentralized approach. The Germans used this method of task-oriented, decentralized command through the first half of World War II; German doctrine used the term *Auftragstaktik* to describe it.<sup>4</sup> American commanders took notice of it during World War II, but struggled with how best to integrate it into doctrine. In 1986, over one hundred years after Moltke included mission-orders in Prussian military doctrine, the United States Army formally adopted mission-orders in Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*.<sup>5</sup> Today, the US Army's mission command principles closely resemble the Prussian General Staff's use of mission tactics at army, corps, and division levels of command during the Franco-Prussian War.

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<sup>4</sup>*Truppenfuehrung, Tiel I*, Heeresdienstvorschriften 300/1 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1936), 1-5, 10, 15-16.; John T. Nelsen II, "Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle," *Parameters* 17:3 (September 1987), 21.

<sup>5</sup>Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5 *Operations* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), 21. All editions of Field Manual 100-5 are hereafter cited as FM 100-5 followed by the year of publication.

As one of the foundations of unified land operations, mission command specifically emphasizes individual initiative within the commander's intent for an operation.<sup>6</sup>

Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the Prussian General Staff during the Franco-Prussian War, defined *Auftragstaktik* as the actions a subordinate took in the absence of orders that supported the senior commander's intent.<sup>7</sup> The use of mission tactics allowed subordinate commanders like Prince Frederick Karl, Gen. Konstantin von Alvensleben, and Gen. Karl von Steinmetz to interpret how best to achieve the commander's intent based upon their understanding of the tactical situation. Furthermore, the Prussian use of *Auftragstaktik* during the Franco-Prussian War acknowledged both the risk and the opportunity inherent in this method of decentralized command. The commander could accept individual unit and commander failure since all subordinate commanders understood the desired strategic and operational ends. The General Staff reflected after the war that initiative and failure was probably more desirable than caution and inaction.<sup>8</sup> Commanders that failed were rarely relieved as long as their understanding of the directives was sound and their execution vigorous.

Few modern works address the Franco-Prussian War and the incorporation of *Auftragstaktik* by the German armies during that conflict. Two modern histories of the Franco-Prussian War typically dominate the academic field. The first, Sir Michael Howard's *Franco-Prussian War* is generally considered by historians to be the definitive history of the conflict. The second, Geoffrey's Wawro's *The Franco-Prussian War*, largely compliments Howard's analysis. However, his volume adds a more definitive narrative concerning the Prussian actions to defeat a

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<sup>6</sup>Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), iii, 6. Hereafter cited as ADP 3-0.

<sup>7</sup>Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke, *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* in Daniel Hughes, ed. *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 171.

<sup>8</sup>German General Staff, *The Franco-German War, 1870-1871*, vol. 1, trans. F. C. H. Clarke (1874; repr., Nashville: Battery Press, 1995), 253.

number of smaller French armies during the siege of Paris. Wawro is also the only author specifically to address the use of *Auftragstaktik* in his analysis of the Prussian actions. In addition to these contemporary accounts, the German General Staff's five-volume official records, *The Franco-German War, 1870-1871*, provides in depth accounts of the battles from the German perspective. Conversely, a number of modern authors have addressed *Auftragstaktik* and its adoption as doctrine by the US Army, but no single volume or article dominates the field. In *The German Way of War*, Robert Citino offered some analysis of *Auftragstaktik*'s evolution in the German Army and in his conclusion offers analysis of the problems associated with the US Army's adoption of mission tactics in modern doctrine.

Despite the common belief in modern US military doctrine, *Auftragstaktik* and mission command are not synonymous terms. Most modern authors ignore the historical environment in which the Prussian army operated during the Franco-Prussian War. Military commanders belonged to the nobility or *Junker*<sup>9</sup> class because the king sought to link those classes with the national government. In other words, the monarch believed that he could trust these officers because they had the most to lose if the government collapsed in a revolution or war. However, their chiefs of staff and primary advisors rarely came from the same privileged background. Indeed, because of their status, commanders had the right to act independently of Moltke's instructions while on campaign. Further highlighting the social differences within the Prussian army, individual soldiers came almost exclusively from the lower classes because they were subject to universal service. Generally, they lacked upward mobility through promotion to the officer ranks. In theory, every soldier in the US Army has the potential to move into the officer ranks, command units, and make attain the rank of general. Another important contextual

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<sup>9</sup>At the onset of the Franco-Prussian War, Prussian society consisted of four general orders. The nobility formed the top tier of society and the *Junker* class the tier immediately below it. The *Junkers* typically were a form of lesser nobility, although they wielded enormous influence as the primary landowners in Prussia.

difference between the Prussian army and the modern US Army is the amount of information instantly available to the commander on the battlefield through the use of radios, computers, drones, and satellite imagery. It is much more difficult for a modern subordinate commander to act independently of his higher commander by taking advantage of the time to transmit information between headquarters.

## **Towards Auftragstaktik**

The philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* did not originate with Moltke. In fact, it predates the general's service in the Prussian Army. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Prussian Army still resembled Frederick the Great's army from fifty years earlier. Frederick believed that to maintain Prussia's economic strength, he could not mobilize more than three-percent of the total male population except in the direst of situations. As a result, he relied on foreigners, prisoners of war, and volunteers from occupied territories like Silesia.<sup>10</sup> This reorganization created an untrustworthy army and Frederick had to take measures to ensure the loyalty of these regiments. First, he relied almost entirely on Prussia's nobility for the officer corps. Frederick the Great demobilized the few *bourgeois* class officers left in his army following the Seven Years War, so that in 1806, less than ten-percent of the army's 7,000 officers were not from the nobility.<sup>11</sup> Since an army comprised of mercenaries might not act in the kingdom's best interests, the army's commander in the field was usually the king or a male heir loyal to the king. Finally, the king restricted his field commanders by using centralized command and allowed only a few trusted individuals to exercise initiative.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Erwin Dette, *Friedrichs der Große und sein Heer* (Göttingen: Bandenhoed and Ruprecht, 1914), 8-19.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer und seine Offiziere* (Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1935), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup>Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 16-17.

The Prussian Army's defeat at the hands of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* at the battles of Jena and Auerstädt in October 1806 served as an impetus for change. King Frederick Wilhelm III appointed the Military Reorganization Commission in early 1807 to study the reasons for the army's defeat, assign blame to the appropriate commanders, and make recommendations for change. The committee found that poor leadership, inadequate training, recruitment, an aging officer corps, and the army's organization all contributed to Prussia's defeat.<sup>13</sup>

Few government officials or military officers could have predicted the extent to which the reforms between 1807 and 1810 changed both the army and Prussian society. The members of the commission believed that a rift existed between Prussian people and the government. By extension, the average citizen cared little about the army's success or failure in war. In response, Frederick Wilhelm III instituted a number of societal changes to create a relationship between the people and the army. In October 1807, he ended hereditary serfdom and in November 1808, Frederick Wilhelm allowed the formation of local city governments where the average citizen could seek representation.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary action in the army ended.

More importantly, the commission recommended sweeping changes to the officer corps. Although the king did not surrender his right to appoint commanders, the commission recommended the opening of the officer ranks to the *bourgeois* class again, making education, not social position, the deciding factor for obtaining a commission.<sup>15</sup> The army created a system of examinations tied to promotions. After passing the examination, candidates attended one of three schools for a basic nine-month course. Select individuals could attend newly created

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 38; Curt Jany, *Geschichte der königlich-preußische Armee*, vol. 4 of *Die Königlich-Preußische Armee und das deutsche Reichsheer 1807 bis 1914* (Berlin: K. Siegmund, 1933), 2-3.

<sup>14</sup>Frieherr vom Stein, *Briefwechsel, Denkschriften und Aufzeichnungen* (Berlin: C. Heymanns Verlag, 1937), ii-iv.

<sup>15</sup>Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer und seine Offiziere*, 15.

*Kriegsakademie*, with its associated *Selekta*, which served as training ground for the new General Staff.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the new concept of directive command, which later became *Auftragstaktik*, appeared for the first time when the army published the 1806 doctrinal manual, *Exerzierreglement*, to guide the organization of the new army and its leadership. It stated that the commander should give “his divisional commanders the general concept in a few words, and show them the general layout of the ground on which the army is to form up. The manner of deployment is left up to them [the subordinates]; fastest is best. The commander cannot be everywhere.”<sup>17</sup> For the first time, the army’s leadership advocated a system of decentralized command of subordinate units. The idea was revolutionary for its time and place. Decentralized command in the Prussian army had risks when combined with universal conscription, an officer corps open to almost all backgrounds, and an uneasy relationship between the *Junkers* and the nobles. This decision not only reflected the increased education and capability of the new officer corps, but also the reality of commanding an army in the Napoleonic era. Frederick Wilhelm III entrusted his subordinates with the very tool that could depose him.

*Auftragstaktik* is an artificial word comprised of two German terms, which has led to some misunderstandings in its application to military theory. *Auftrag* translates into English as task, and *taktik* refers to military tactics. Military theorists have thereafter used the two words together to describe a system of command and control characterized by “mission-oriented tactics,” or simply “mission orders.” The word *Auftragstaktik* first appeared in German doctrine

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<sup>16</sup>Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945*, 45.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Simpkin, *Race to the Swift* (London: Brassey’s Defence, 1986), 227.

during the Second World War, although the concept is usually attributed to Moltke's writings as Chief of the Prussian General Staff.<sup>18</sup>

However, Moltke never used the word *Auftragstaktik* in his writing. Instead, Moltke typically described orders as belonging to one of two types. The first type, a direct order or *Befehl*, contained much detail on both the task and the method. The second type of order, a directive or *Direktiven*, conveyed the subordinate's task and explained the higher commander's reason for assigning that task, but it allowed the subordinate more freedom of action to accomplish that task. Writing after the Franco-Prussian War, the General Staff explained that it generally limited itself to directives, which "conveyed guidelines rather than definite actions for immediate action. These guidelines should serve as a precept for [a subordinate's] later independent decisions."<sup>19</sup> Two exceptions existed: when the movements of two large units needed to be closely coordinated, and when the king felt that the field commanders were not meeting the intent of his directives.<sup>20</sup>

Moltke's writings between the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) illustrate the importance he placed on the concept that eventually became *Auftragstaktik*. He clearly envisioned a system of issuing orders that emphasized commanders conveying the "why" rather than the "how." He wrote, "It is crucial for the subordinate to understand the purpose of the operation, and then work for realization even if it means working against the actual orders. Within the higher commander's perspective it is necessary to tell the

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<sup>18</sup>John T. Nelsen II, "Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle", *Parameters* 17: no. 3 (September 1987): 21-22.

<sup>19</sup>German General Staff, *Der deutsch-französische Krieg, 1870-71*, vol. 1 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1874-81), 155.

<sup>20</sup>Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Thoughts on Command" in Daniel Hughes, ed. *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 79.

subordinate only what is necessary to accomplish the purpose.”<sup>21</sup> The Prussian officers’ adherence to this philosophy repeatedly played itself out, to the detriment of the French Army, on the battlefields of the Franco-Prussian War.

Thus, Moltke believed that the higher the commander’s position, the less prescriptive his orders should be to his subordinates. He argued that a large numbers of orders, or verbose orders, could confuse leaders on the commander’s true intent. This problem could compound itself through every echelon of command making it difficult for a division, or even a brigade commander, to decipher the reason for the mission.<sup>22</sup>

## **Moltke’s 1869 Instructions for Large Unit Commanders**

Following the successful Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Gen. Helmuth von Moltke ordered the General Staff to study the campaign, identify ways that the army could improve its conduct of operations, and make recommendations for organizational changes. The study took nearly two years to complete. On 25 July 1868, Moltke presented the General Staff’s findings to Wilhelm I.<sup>23</sup> One portion of the study formed the basis for Moltke’s *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*, which he published the following year. This book is important because it codified into doctrine many of the guiding principles for mission command for the first time.

*Instructions* is an important document for understanding Prussian, and later German, military theory and doctrine. Moltke used it to explain his comprehensive approach to war, explaining not only the command and control of large units in battle but also the purpose for going to war, the role of politics in war, and other large concepts. Moltke’s work, like

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<sup>21</sup>Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke, “Moltkes Taktisch-Strategische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1857 bis 1871,” in *Moltkes Militärische Werke*, vol. 2, no. 2, ed. German General Staff (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1892-1912), 183. Hereafter cited as *MMW*.

<sup>22</sup>*MMW*, vol. 2, no. 2, 180.

<sup>23</sup>Daniel Hughes, ed. *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 171.

Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*, was broad enough to have lasting value in German military culture. The book survived as a doctrinal manual until the onset of World War II with only minor changes.<sup>24</sup> However, *Instructions* is perhaps most important because it created a common understanding of large unit command, organization, and tactics in the Prussian Army just prior to the onset of the Franco-Prussian War.

Two sections of the 1869 version of the *Instructions* specifically address the idea of mission orders. The first, and shorter, entry appeared early in the first section of the work. Moltke wrote that each commander must act in accordance with his own judgment or instinct rather than wait for orders. He added the caveat that the subordinate's actions should support the higher commander's vision when possible.<sup>25</sup> This entry reflected Moltke's belief that war needed to be decided quickly and decisively, but that action should not be taken without analysis of the problem. Throughout Moltke's writings and teachings a theme prevailed that "“though great successes presuppose bold risk-taking, careful thought must precede the taking of risk.””<sup>26</sup> Commanders needed to balance the risk of initiative and caution. If a subordinate wasted valuable time by trying to clarify or seek orders, he could conceivably miss his chance at victory. The German General Staff confirmed this idea in 1874 in its analysis of the 13th and 14th divisions' actions of the Battles of Wörth and Spicheren during the war's opening campaign.<sup>27</sup> Equally, a commander that charged blindly in into a battle with no forethought could bring about a disastrous result. Steinmetz's repeated assaults at the Mance Ravine during the Battle of Gravelotte demonstrated this extreme.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>25</sup>Moltke, *Instructions*, 171.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 168.

<sup>27</sup>German General Staff, *The Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:252-54.

Moltke expanded on these ideas and fully explained the intent of mission orders in the second section “Communications between Commands and Units.” The Chief of the Prussian Staff wrote that detailed orders beyond the immediate tactical situation were usually of little value. Each battle, movement, and deployment changed the situation, which required the commander to reexamine the battlefield conditions. He later suggested that this would cause higher commanders to issue too many orders, confusing their subordinates.<sup>28</sup> Critics of the Prussian system of command and control often reference this section as evidence that Moltke lacked the ability or the will to conduct detailed tactical planning.<sup>29</sup>

This criticism, however, is shortsighted and does not account for the full extent of Moltke’s “system of expedients.” He explained that higher-level commanders often had to balance vague, delayed, and occasionally contradictory reports from the field. Commanders closer to the battle usually had a better understanding of the problem in front of their units. Therefore, orders should start with general directives at the highest levels, with subordinate commanders adding detail to the initial order based on their understanding of the battlefield. This system was intended to ensure that subordinate commanders would have freedom of action within the intent of their commander’s directive. Finally, Moltke acknowledged even in this manual that occasionally subordinate commanders needed the ability to act in a manner that contradicted the letter of the order as long as the subordinate met the intent of the order.<sup>30</sup>

Moltke’s 1869 *Instructions* laid the theoretical foundation for mission orders, while the Franco-Prussian War served as its laboratory. He set forth a number of principles that survived in German doctrine, and, which eventually the US Army incorporated into its own doctrine. First

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<sup>28</sup>Moltke, *Instructions*, 184-85, 215-16.

<sup>29</sup>Terence Zuber, *The Moltke Myth: Prussian War Planning 1857-1871* (New York: University Press of America, 2008), 305-08.

<sup>30</sup>Moltke, *Instructions*, 184-85.

and foremost, commanders needed to emphasize the purpose of their orders rather than the method of execution. This principle allowed subordinates the maximum amount of freedom in execution. Long or numerous orders could cause confusion on the battlefield by diluting a mission's purpose in verbose language. Second, subordinate commanders could disobey a direct order if the situation had changed, and they could achieve the intent through another means. When in doubt, commanders should seize the initiative rather than wait for orders. Finally, Moltke believed that commanders could never have complete and timely understanding of the battlefield. Subordinates were responsible for timely and accurate reporting to their commander; however, delays in reporting, incorrect reports, and an ever-changing situation affected the higher commander's visualization of the battlefield. The senior commander's primary means of influencing the battlefield was through the employment of his reserve forces.<sup>31</sup>

## **Mission Command**

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, is the US Army's capstone manual on the conduct of today's military operations. The most recent version of this manual, approved in October 2011, is significantly different from the field manuals that preceded it. The new manual is less than thirty pages, and only broadly introduces a number of subjects covered in subsequent manuals. In theory, all other doctrinal manuals must link to the ideas put forth in ADP 3-0. It is important to note that ADP 3-0 is actually a revision of the previous *Operations* manuals FM 3-0 and FM 100-5, and therefore it is not entirely new. One of the terms carried forward from the previous editions and featured prominently throughout the new manual is mission command.

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<sup>31</sup>MMW, vol. 4, no. 3, 103.

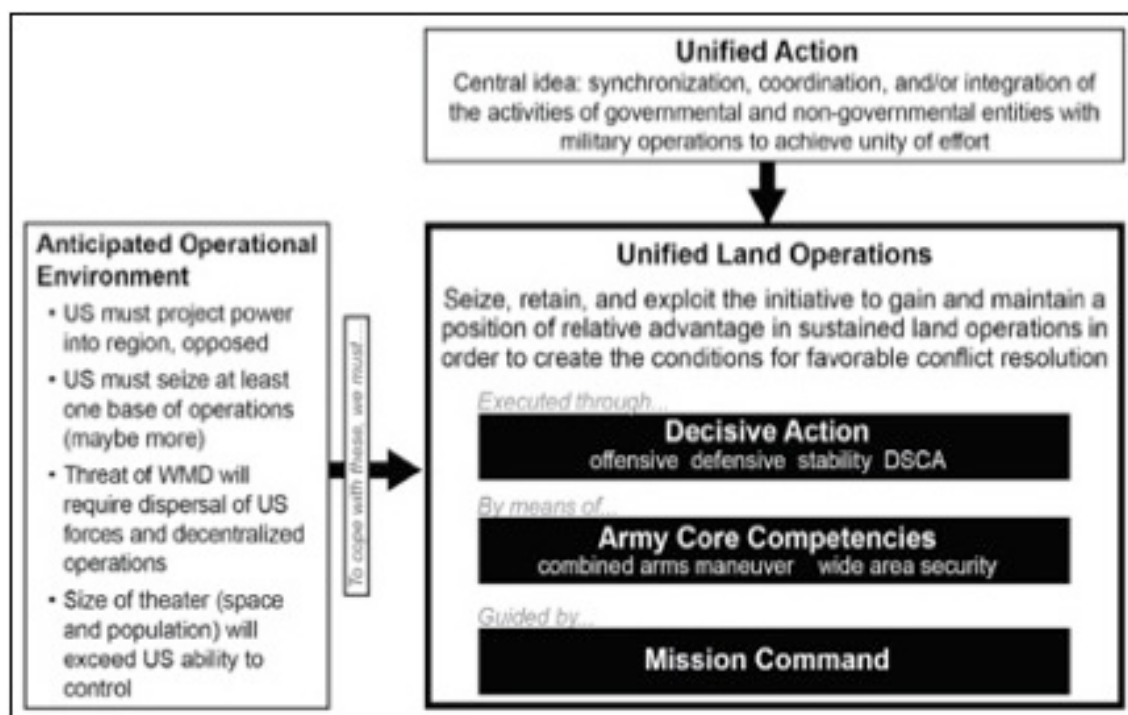


Figure 1. Unified Land Operations

*Source:* Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), iii.

The manual's capstone concept, unified action, is new to the US doctrinal lexicon; however, it incorporated the older concept of mission command. In fact, mission command is the guiding principle of unified land operations, which are conducted through decisive action using the Army's core competencies (Figure 1). In other words, mission command is the controlling function of military units conducting offensive, defensive, and stability operations. ADP 3-0's writers envisioned, "a philosophy of command that emphasizes broad mission-type orders, individual initiative within the commander's intent, and leaders who can anticipate and adapt quickly to change."<sup>32</sup> Commanders employ this philosophy through the use six guidelines: Build

<sup>32</sup>Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), ii-iv, 6.

cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander's intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk.

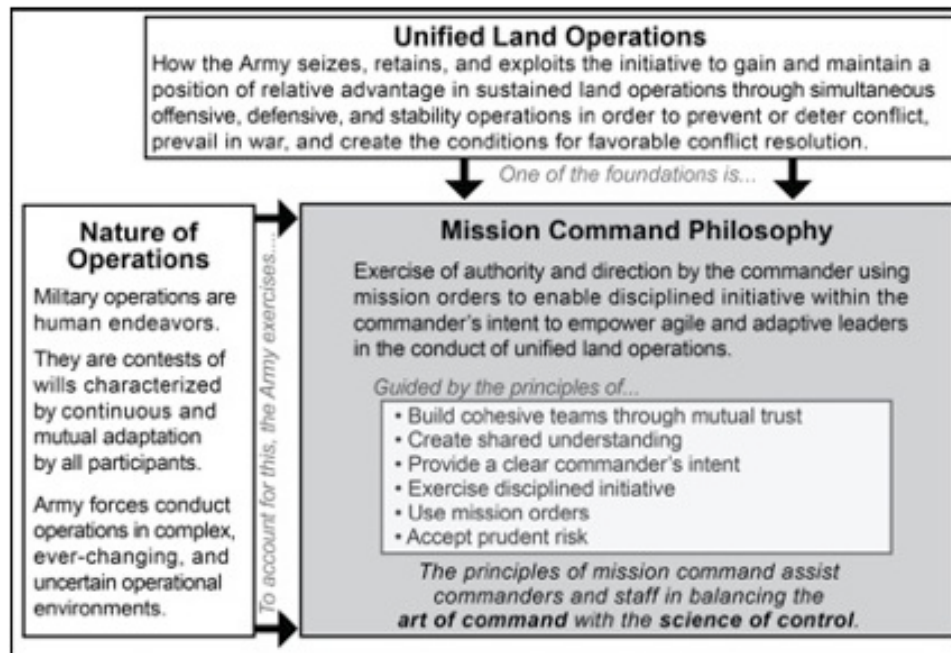


Figure 2. The Mission Command Philosophy

Source: Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), iv.

Mission command's guiding principles create one of the best logical bridges between Moltke's writings, the Prussian army's experience in 1870, and modern US Army doctrine. For instance, the principle of mission orders harkens back to Moltke's *Instructions*. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, defines mission orders as directives that convey the commander's desired end state, but not the method by which to achieve them. In other words, these orders are not prescriptive in nature.<sup>33</sup> Instead, they allow subordinate commanders freedom to determine the best method of achieving the commander's intent. The guidelines capture the essence of mission command and help create understanding of why mission command is an attractive concept for military

<sup>33</sup>Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), 6.

commanders, while at the same time correcting for problems that Moltke encountered during the Franco-Prussian War.

Commanders, supported by their staffs, execute mission command to balance the art of command with the science of control by using the operations process. The model contains a linear process by which the commander understands the operational environment, visualizes an operational end state, describes the synchronization of time, space, resources, purpose, and action, and finally directs the action (Figure 3).<sup>34</sup> Throughout the process, the commander continually assesses the situation and acts as necessary. Moltke's influence on the operations process is apparent, even if it was unintended. After the Franco-Prussian War, he reflected on the character of an ideal Prussian commander and concluded that he be, "able to see through fog-enshrouded uncertainty, to see the real situation, to guess at the unknown, to reach quick decisions, and then execute with alacrity and constancy." Furthermore, he explained that the commander would find the battlefield conditions constantly changing, requiring him to think through his unit's actions and their consequences.<sup>35</sup> The operations process captured the essence of Moltke's writings, intentionally or unintentionally, within the commander activities portion of the model.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 3-3.

<sup>35</sup>Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke, *Moltke's Aufmarschpläne 1871-1888*, vol. 1, ed. Ferdinand von Schmerfeld (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1921), 78-79.

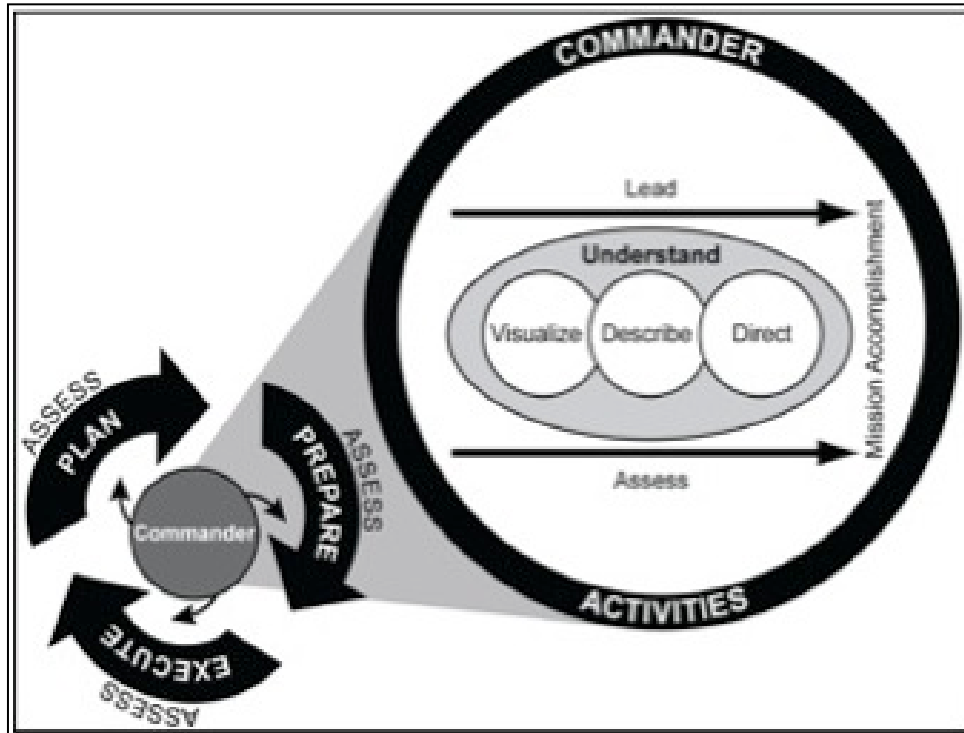


Figure 3. The Operations Process

Source: Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), 3-3.

## War with France

The Prussian Army just prior to the Franco-Prussian War remains an excellent case study for military theorists and historians attempting to understand the US Army's strategic environment. Political, economic, and military realities heavily influenced both armies' conduct of war. Prussia's ruling class was very concerned with the financial cost of war and the effect of having a significant portion of the male population mobilized had on the economy.<sup>36</sup> In Moltke's *Instructions*, he defined Prussia's operating environment and the achievement of a rapid, decisive

<sup>36</sup>Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945*, 17; Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 151-159, 307.

victory as the goal of all military operations.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, ADP 3-0 lists decisive action as one of the foundations of unified land operations. Similar to Prussia at the onset of the Franco-Prussian War, the US Army strives to create operations that are rapid, unpredictable, and disorienting to the enemy to limit the shock on the US's political and economic systems, take advantage of it technological advantages, and attain decisive, limited tactical victories.<sup>38</sup> It has made several assumptions about the operational environment with the unified land operations model (Figure 1), including the need to project power into another region while opposed by an enemy force, the size of the combatant population and country, and the difficulty of maintaining long logistical lines. The Prussians encountered all of these variables during the Franco-Prussian War.

Similar to the US today, Prussia could not unilaterally declare war because of political and military realities in a Europe ruled by five major powers (Great Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, and Austria) following the Treaty of Vienna in 1815. Every decision these countries made attempted to maintain the status quo, since nearly any action by the one affected the least one of the other states.<sup>39</sup> In the post-Congress of Vienna Europe, Prussia needed to build a coalition to gain the legitimacy needed to challenge another state's interests. Generally speaking, these lesser states could contribute additional manpower and resources to a coalition while giving the appearance that Prussian was acting for the greater good. As a result, it often had to balance the political realities of coalition warfare within its military objectives. The same general concepts guide the use of US military power.

In 1866, the Austro-Prussian War marked a turning point in the consolidation of Prussia's power and the unification of Germany. *Ministerpräsident* (Prime Minister) Otto von Bismarck used the victory at the Battle of Königgrätz over the Austrian army as an excuse to annex several

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<sup>37</sup>Moltke, *Instructions*, 176.

<sup>38</sup>ADP 3-0, 5.

<sup>39</sup>Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 10.

small German states that had sided with the Hapsburgs. The consolidation of states into the North German Confederation, controlled by the Berlin government, added significantly to Prussia's population and its economic and military resources, putting it on par with France.<sup>40</sup> Although Napoleon III tried to counter the growing Prussian influence through a series of diplomatic moves designed to gain influence over the German states west of the Rhine, Bismarck refused to give up his goal of realizing the *Kleindeutsche Lösung*. When the French diplomatic advance was stopped Napoleon III realized he must prepare for war with Prussia.<sup>41</sup>

Both Napoleon III and Bismarck needed a war to silence internal unrest and to increase their countries' influence. Bismarck leveraged the French demand for the Duchy of Luxembourg in order to bring the Catholic southern German states into the Prussian military alliance and the economic parliament, *Zollparlament*.<sup>42</sup> Were France to declare war on Prussia, it would trigger defensive alliances with the southern German states. Bismarck hoped that this action would ignite German patriotism in the Catholic states and allow for the creation of a united Germany under Prussia's leadership.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Napoleon III's government developed significant social problems resulting from a botched rigged election in 1869. Disgruntled French citizens called for strikes, rioted, and even burned a portion of Paris.<sup>44</sup>

In the end, three events finally tricked Napoleon III into declaring war on Prussia. First, the seeming momentum of Bismarck's *Kleindeutsche Lösung* positioned King Wilhelm I as the future emperor of a united Germany, a state larger and more powerful than France. Second, the

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<sup>40</sup>W. Rüstow, *The War for the Rhine Frontier 1870: Its Political and Military History*, vol. 1, trans. John Layland Needham (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1871), 10.

<sup>41</sup>Henry M. Hozier, *The Franco-Prussian War: Its Causes, Incidents, and Consequences*, vol. 1 (London: William MacKenzie, 1872), 170-73. The *Kleindeutsche Lösung* refers to creation of a unified Germany without Austria.

<sup>42</sup>Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 23.

<sup>43</sup>Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174, 286.

<sup>44</sup>Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 27.

Prussian backing of the Saint Gotthard Railroad Tunnel project through Switzerland appeared to align Italy with Prussia at the expense of French influence in the region. Finally, Bismarck supported Prince Leopold, a Protestant Hohenzollern candidate for the throne of Catholic Spain albeit not seriously. Faced with the threat of the House of Hohenzollern across the Pyrennes and across the Rhine, France took the bait and declared war on Prussia.<sup>45</sup>

The early military campaigns in the Franco-Prussian War provide insight into both the opportunities and the limitations of commanding and controlling the Prussian Army through directive control. At times, Moltke seemed powerless to stop his subordinate army commanders from making decisions that threatened to undo the synchronization and mobilization that he had carefully planned. Twice Gen. Karl Friedrich von Steinmetz marched his First Army in front of Prince Frederick Karl's Second Army while attempting to find and engage the enemy. Before the Battle of Spicheren, Steinmetz's forces actually marched between Second Army and its reconnoitering cavalry force. At other times, subordinate commanders seized the initiative in the absence of orders based on a perceived or real weakness of the French forces opposite them. The opening battles of Weissenburg and Spicheren in August 1870 demonstrate both initiative and the disregard of Moltke's orders. The Prussians seized the initiative and attacked across the Saar River earlier than Moltke planned. Even in the first few weeks, Moltke seemed receptive to feedback from the subordinate commanders and their chiefs of staff. He had even delayed the initial assault into France from 31 July to 4 August to allow the Third Army more time receive troops and sort out the train loads of supplies. Moltke did this, knowing that the delay would result in the French attacking first.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Moltke, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 5-6.

<sup>46</sup>Julius von Verdy du Vernois, *With the Royal Headquarters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company: 1891), 59.; Albrecht von Blumenthal, *Journals of Field-Marshal Count von Blumenthal for 1866 and 1870-1871*, trans. A. D. Gillespie-Addison (London: Edward Arnold, 1903), 84-86.

Despite some missteps by the Prussian commanders, Moltke remained committed to providing tactical instructions through the use of directive orders. While Moltke usually encouraged caution and coordination, the king never relieved a commander for exercising initiative, regardless of the result. The king was comfortable with accepting some risk to allow his commanders the opportunity to “attack the enemy wherever he is found.”<sup>47</sup> Over the course of the first few weeks, the Royal Headquarters learned which commanders needed more or less guidance.

## Weissenburg-Spicheren

The Franco-Prussian War marked the first time that the Prussian Army conducted military operations using the doctrine of directives rather than direct orders. Although some historians consider the culminating battle of the Austro-Prussian War, Königgrätz, as the defining achievement of mission orders, the fact is simply that Moltke had not fully developed and disseminated the idea until the publication of his *Instructions* in 1869.<sup>48</sup> Headquarters had used both *Befehl* and *Direktiven* orders to control the armies in 1866. Typically, the army commanders were in continuous contact with headquarters by a combination of telegraph and courier. In the absence of new orders, the army commanders continued to execute in the spirit of the old orders. In May 1870, the three Prussian army commanders and their chiefs of staff met with Moltke and the king in Berlin to rehearse the opening mobilization and initial maneuvers in a possible war with France. Even with these preparations, and the fact the French had not deviated from their anticipated actions, it seems that none of the three Army commanders were initially comfortable

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<sup>47</sup>Helmuth von Moltke, *The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, trans. Archibald Forbes (London: Harper & Brothers, 1907), 8.

<sup>48</sup>Robert M. Citino has argued that this view is ridiculous since most of the subordinate commanders simply disregarded Moltke’s orders. Robert M. Citino, *The German War of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 170-72. Gordon A. Craig, on the other hand, stated that at least part of Prussian victory should be attributed to Moltke’s system of command. Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia’s Victory over Austria, 1866* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 178-79.

with Moltke's use of directives. Each commander sent copies of his orders back to the headquarters to ensure that they were in accordance with the king's intentions.<sup>49</sup>

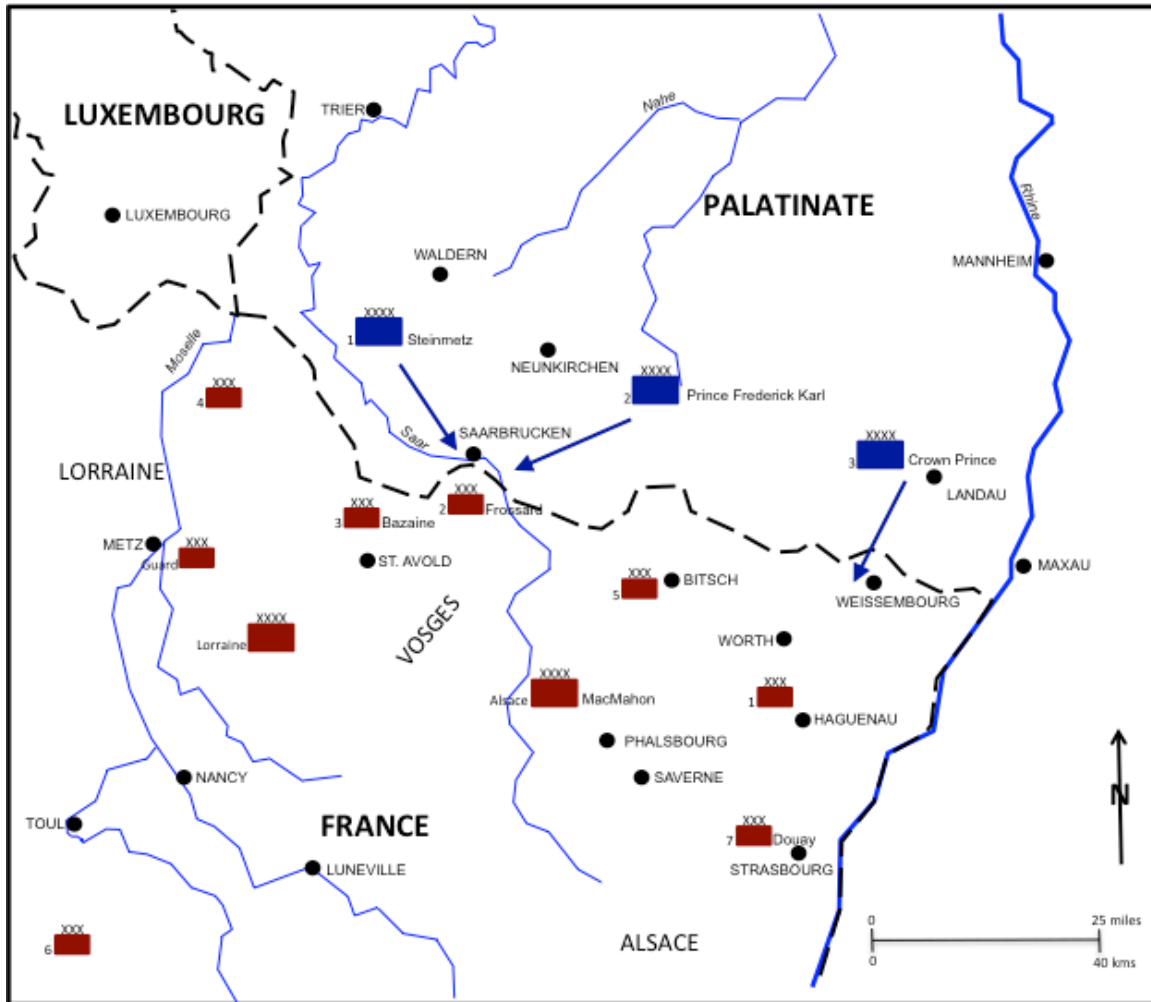


Figure 4. Moltke's Plan on 1 August 1870

Source: Created by author

Much as in 1866, Moltke relied on a redundant system to send and receive communications between headquarters while the army conducted operations. The majority of the

<sup>49</sup>Helmuth von Moltke, *Extracts from Moltke's Military Correspondence Pertaining to the War of 1870-71*, ed. Historical Section of the German General Staff (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Son, 1896), 69. Hereafter cited as *Correspondence*.

communications still moved across the battlefield by courier, generally between members of the General Staff, because they shared a common education and drilled together annually. The Prussians also used the telegraph for some routine communications between headquarters, but these communications were limited to routine reports, supply requests, and personnel statuses. Since it was possible to tap an unguarded telegraph line the Prussians used a cipher for sending coded messages over the telegraph. Moltke preferred sending coded messages and orders using couriers, although he used the telegraph to alert the army headquarters to expect the message. During the invasion of France, the Prussian army spent a great deal of time building and securing telegraph lines. Their efforts allowed communications between the king and the government in Berlin and to the different headquarters during the sieges of Metz and Paris.

Members of the German General Staff delivered the initial orders to the three army headquarters for the Prussians to assume the offensive the first week of August 1870. The war opened with the battles of Weissenburg and Spicheren. Moltke initially envisioned a double envelopment of the French Army of the Rhine by the First and Third armies. By trapping the French army with Napoleon III along the border, Moltke hoped to end the war quickly and decisively, in a manner similar to the Battle of Königgrätz. In Moltke's plan Prince Frederick Karl's Second Army, the largest Prussian army would attack directly across the Saar River against the center of the French Army. General Steinmetz's First Army would cross the river at Saarlouis to find the French northern flank, and Crown Prince Frederick Wilhelm's Third Army would fight through the Vosges Mountains to threaten the southern flank. If Moltke timed the movements of three armies correctly, the French would move their army to reinforce the center to ensure the safety of their primary supply depot at Forbach.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>German General Staff. *The Franco-German War 1870-1871*. 1:100, 110.; Moltke, *The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 9-10.

Hoping to capitalize on the presumed strengths of its long-service, professional army, the French unwittingly attacked into the Prussian center in an attempt to assume the offensive. Napoleon III's men thrust across the Saar River and captured the Prussian town of Saarbrücken on 2 August 1870. Although unanticipated, the Prussian headquarters was pleased with the French attack. The maneuver concentrated the entire French Army in a small pocket between the Moselle River in the north and the small frontier town of Weissenburg in the south. Initially, French commanders failed to realize that this placed the French Army completely inside Moltke's planned envelopment. However, by the time Moltke was ready to initiate his plan the French realized their perilous position and withdrew to the west bank of the Saar. The two-day operation failed to capture anything of military value, which led Marshal François Achille Bazaine, the most experienced French commander, to question the purpose of conducting the operation.<sup>51</sup>

Prussian Royal Headquarters at Mainz was eager to take advantage of the French misstep. It issued the following order to General Steinmetz on the afternoon of 3 August to convey the overall concept of maneuver for the upcoming operation:

Wavering advance of the French leads us to anticipate that the Second Army can be assembled on the 6th instant in front of the belt of forest at Kaiserslautern. If rapid advance of the enemy cannot be checked, concentration of the Second Army behind the Lauter [River]. Cooperation of both armies in battle purposed, First Army from St. Wendel or Baumholder. His Majesty commands the First Army to concentrate towards Tholey on the 4th. Third Army crosses the frontier tomorrow at Weissenburg. A general offensive is proposed.<sup>52</sup>

The commanders of the Second and Third Armies received similar orders that conveyed the king's intent that all three Prussian armies would move in concert against the French. The order is typical of Moltke's directives style. He did not order any of the armies to attack the

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<sup>51</sup>François Achille Bazaine, *Épisodes de la Guerre de 1870 et le Blocus de Metz* (Madrid: Gaspar, 1883), 18.

<sup>52</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:100.

enemy. Instead, he oriented the commanders in a certain direction and allowed them the freedom to develop the situation. The General Staff referenced the enemy advance because they had not determined if the French offensive at Saarbrücken had already culminated on the afternoon of 2 August. They also speculated that Gen. Abel Douay's 2nd Division, I Corps might cross the Rhine south of Third Army's planned advance and move north through the Black Forest to threaten Prussian lines of communication.<sup>53</sup> The staff hoped to avoid having either the First or Second Army fight the bulk of the French Army alone, but it did not place a restriction on the two commanders forcing them to cooperate in their attacks.<sup>54</sup>

Crown Prince Frederick Wilhelm's Third Army crossed the Lauter River near the town of Weissenburg on 4 August in accordance with the Prussian plan. The General Staff understood that Third Army's attack needed to occur first because it had the greatest distance to march before it could threaten the French southern flank. The Crown Prince issued orders to his army for the morning of 4 August stating, "It is my intention tomorrow to advance with the army as far the Lauter, and to throw vanguards across it. With this object the Bienwald will be traversed on four roads. The enemy is to be driven back wherever he is found." The rest of the order detailed the parallel lines of march for prince's subordinate units, a detail often dictated by the higher headquarters to ensure that units and their trains could move without hindrance. Later that night, he followed up the written orders with a verbal directive to each major unit stating that each column must be able to reinforce other units if they engaged the enemy when practical.<sup>55</sup>

Frederick Wilhelm forwarded a copy of Third Army's orders to the Royal Headquarters to ensure

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<sup>53</sup>Moltke, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 10. Gen. Abel Douay was not related to the commander of the French VII Corps, Gen. Felix Douay.

<sup>54</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:105.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 119-120.

that his movements and directives were in line with the king's intent. Moltke confirmed that they were and reiterated that, "The Third Army is left quite free in the execution of its mission."<sup>56</sup>

The orders on 4 August clearly demonstrate the mission-oriented nature at the Royal Headquarters, the army, and the division levels of command. Even when Moltke or the Crown Prince had the chance to make orders more prescriptive, rather than descriptive, they abstained. Moltke had nearly sent a stern telegram back to the Crown Prince's headquarters in the days preceding the attack, because he felt that Third Army was moving too slow. In effect, Moltke nearly resorted to giving a direct order for the army to attack on the original timeline. This telegram could have derailed Moltke's new system of command before it ever got used in a battle. Another member of the staff, Gen. Julius von Verdy, cautioned Moltke that he risked straining the relations with Crown Prince and his Chief of Staff, Gen. Leonhard von Blumenthal, for the entirety of the war if he sent the telegram. In the end, Moltke decided not to interfere, pocketed the telegram, and allowed the Crown Prince more time to prepare for the assault.<sup>57</sup>

With his orders disseminated, the Crown Prince waited to observe how the situation unfolded on 4 August 1870. As it turned out, his soldiers' advance toward the French triggered the first major battle of the war. The Battle of Weissenburg commenced when the 4th Bavarian Division splashed across the Lauter at 0800 and made contact with a small French outpost guarding the crossing. The Bavarians pursued the withdrawing French soldiers to the protection of Weissenburg's fortifications. The town had previously served as a French frontier outpost, although the outpost had fallen into disrepair after 1867.<sup>58</sup> Initially, the battle started with a division fighting on each side, but General Douay's 2nd Division had the advantage of defending from an elevated and fortified position. However, it did not take long for the battle to shift

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<sup>56</sup>Moltke, *Correspondence*, 66.

<sup>57</sup>Verdy, *With the Royal Headquarters*, 46-47.

<sup>58</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:121.

decisively in the Prussians' favor. The Prussian V and XI Corps reached their march objectives about the same time the Bavarian infantry started their attack against the Weissenburg line. Both Lt. Gen. Hugo von Kirchbach and Lt. Gen. Julius von Bose secured their positions and started to move in the direction of the battle with additional brigades in accordance with the Crown Prince's intent..<sup>59</sup>

Even as Prussian reinforcements started arriving on the battlefield, French commanders failed to understand the precariousness of their position. Douay's 2nd Division quickly lost its advantage because of poor communications between units. The French general had initially failed to reinforce the units fighting in the town even though this was his strongest position. Less than two hours into the battle, a caisson hit by Prussian artillery fire exploded, killing General Douay. At a critical point in the battle no one assumed overall command of the French forces for an hour and half. Finally, none of Gen. Patrice MacMahon's three divisions from I Corps moved to reinforce the 2nd Division. Douay had failed to send out couriers to apprise MacMahon or the other division commanders after his initial report that the Bavarians were conducting a small raid was proved false. This, combined with the fact that MacMahon deployed his divisions in positions that were not mutually supportive because of the distance required to march to the sound of battle, Douay's soldiers never stood a chance.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 124-128.

<sup>60</sup>Rüstow, *The War for the Rhine Frontier* 1870, 241.

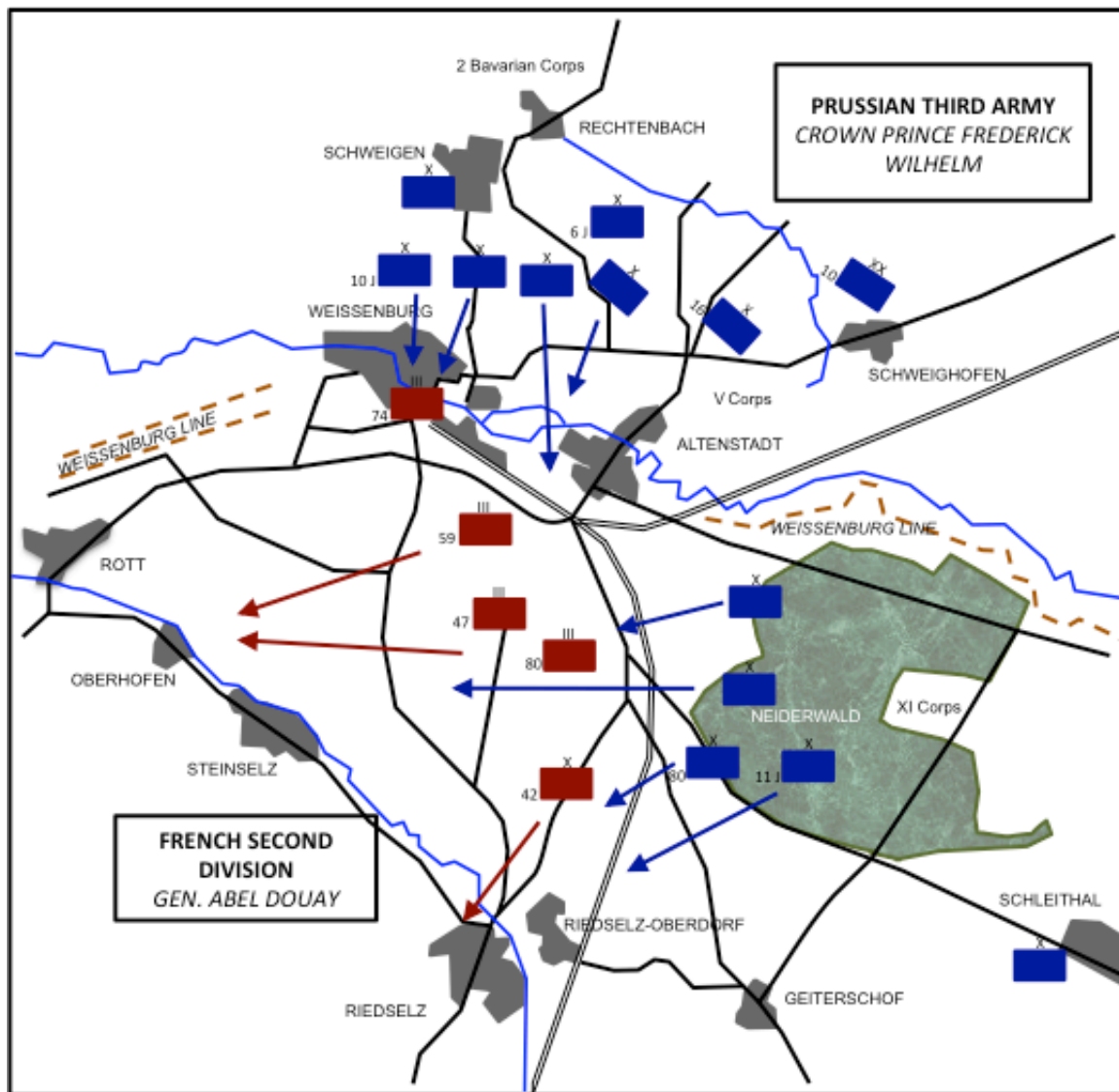


Figure 5. The Battle of Weissenburg

Source: Created by author.

For the next four hours, the French experienced what they referred to as “swarming tactics.” The Prussian units entering the battle to the right and left of the Bavarians appeared to lack organization, command, or control. However, since each commander knew the prince’s intent of driving the enemy from Weissenburg, they knew it merely was a matter of finding and turning a French flank. The discontinuous Prussian lines allowed the artillery to operate wherever

it was most effective. The artillery's freedom of action operated according to the principles of *Artillerie-Massen*, similar to that of *Auftragstaktik*.<sup>61</sup> Eventually, the Prussian divisions found the French right flank, forcing the French 2nd Brigade to retreat to southwest. Douay had ordered a retreat at 1000, but his untimely death confused its execution.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the townspeople undermined the best French position in the town itself by opening the Hagenau Gate and lowering the bridge on the city's north side, which forced the 74th Regiment to surrender *en masse* after a token defense of the Weissenburg palace. At 1530, Frederick Wilhelm ordered his corps to bivouac for the night.<sup>63</sup>

The Battle of Weissenburg is exceptional primarily for the fact that it marked Prussia's invasion of France. Due to the sheer size of the Prussian and Bavarian forces, the outcome of the battle was hardly in doubt after the first few hours. The combined German forces of 66,000 soldiers and 144 guns, easily outmatched the single French division of 8,000 soldiers and 12 guns.<sup>64</sup> Prussian corps and division commanders had seized the initiative to such an extent that the Crown Prince often issued orders only to find that units were already executing them. However, the piecemeal deployment of the Prussian forces did have one disadvantage; the Prussian units suffered casualties disproportionate to their enemy. The combined Prussian and Bavarian forces lost 91 officers and 1,460 soldiers.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 59. The German General Staff further explained these principles and the benefits of using artillery in this manner following the Battle of Gravelotte. See German General Staff, *The Franco-German War, 1870-1871*, vol 2, trans. F. C. H. Clarke (1874; repr., Nashville: Battery Press, 1995), 168.

<sup>62</sup>Moltke, *The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 25; German General Staff, *Franco-German War, 1870-1871*, 1:128.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>64</sup>Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 102.

<sup>65</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1, Appendix 9.

After the Third Army crossed the frontier into France, the other two armies in Moltke's plan started to move slowly toward the border. The five-day delay to start operations had not sat well with some of the commanders, including Steinmetz. Impatient, Steinmetz advanced. At the north end of the Prussian line, his First Army became hopelessly entangled with Prince Frederick Karl's Second Army. Steinmetz, a hero of the Austro-Prussian War, did not understand his role in Moltke's plan, and while he sought to clarify it over the course of three days with the Royal Headquarters, and with the king himself, his army started to move for the Saar crossings at Saarlouis and Saarbrücken. The old hero felt it imperative that the Prussian armies maintain contact with the French, which got harder after Napoleon III ordered the French forces in Saarbrücken to withdraw.<sup>66</sup> Steinmetz's Army moved south using the Saarbrücken Road to try to maintain contact with enemy, even though it was designated for Second Army's use. As it advanced, Second Army's lead elements moved in between Prince Frederick Karl's army and his cavalry.<sup>67</sup> As a result of the entanglement, neither army could move across the Saar in a timely manner, except for Gen. Arnold Karl Georg Kameke's 14th Division. The resulting holdup left the 14th Division on the west side of the Saar River without any support. Curiously, it seems that lower level commanders in both armies discovered the problem, and without notifying their higher commanders, started to work out the problem of reinforcing the 14th Division on their own initiative. The German General Staff credited this cooperation, especially that of Gen. Constantin von Alvensleben and Gen. August Karl von Göben, with saving the resulting battle.<sup>68</sup> This episode is another example of subordinate leaders taking initiative, in the absence of orders, and

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<sup>66</sup>Moltke, *Correspondence*, 66.

<sup>67</sup>German General Staff, *The Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:205; Wolfgang Foerster, *Prinz Friedrich Karl von Preussen: Denkwürdigkeiten aus seinem Leben*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Dt. Verlag-Anst., 1910), 144-47.

<sup>68</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:208-09.

working towards accomplishing the commander's intent when time and the enemy action's did not allow for higher commanders to clarify the situation.

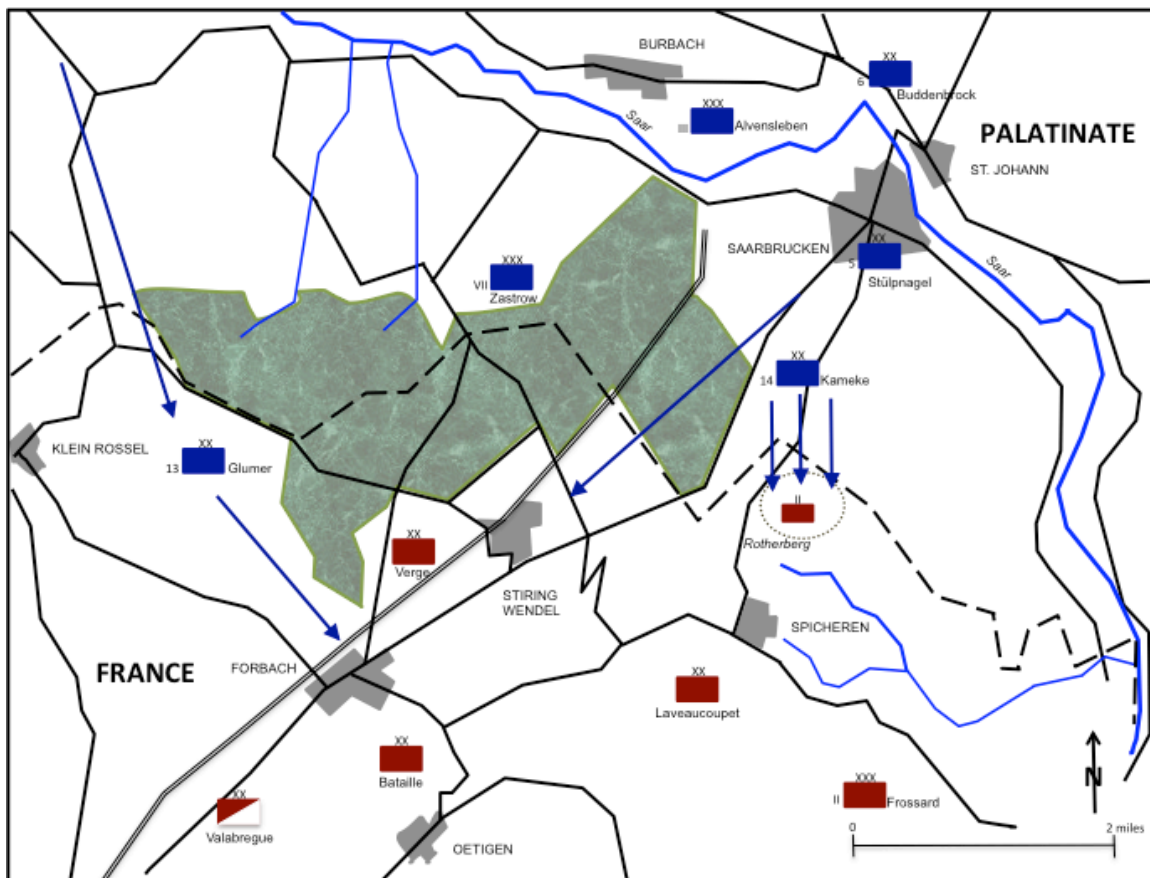


Figure 6. The Battle of Spicheren, Situation at 1700

*Source:* Created by author

The coordination between the lower commanders directly influenced the resulting Battle of Spicheren. After General Kameke's division crossed the Saar River, it continued west without the benefit of reconnaissance. On 6 August, the Prussian 27th Brigade initiated the battle when it stumbled into the French defensive position in the vicinity of Spicheren. In a fashion similar to the Battle of Weissenburg, the French II Corps had the advantage of holding the dominant terrain

at the start of the battle, a steep ridgeline anchored by the dominating hilltop of the Rother Berg. Kameke, thinking that he was attacking the French rear guard, ordered his two brigades to attack Gen. Charles Frossard's corps. Although the 14th Division's initial attacks managed to capture portions of the French lines, the Prussians could not dislodge the French defenders. The French position on the Rother Berg commanded the battlefield and supported each counterattack with plunging fires. The overextended Prussian units, nearly out of ammunition, were about to lose the battle when the reinforcements from the Second Army started to arrive on the battlefield.<sup>69</sup> The battle turned decisively for the Prussians when Maj. Moriz von Lyncker's artillery battery finally gained the heights of the Rother Berg and began to fire into the French lines at ranges less than 800 meters. At 2100, the French forces sounded retreat.

Moltke seemed to appreciate the tactical advantage gained by the Prussians at the Battle of Spicheren even though General Kameke's actions nearly derailed Moltke's entire plan to envelop the Army of the Rhine. Although he acknowledged in his memoirs after the war that Steinmetz's army had maneuvered on General Frossard's II Corps contrary to the master plan, Moltke recognized the tactical advantage it gained for the Prussians by clarifying the enemy's intentions. The Battle of Spicheren illustrated the balance between initiative and risk needed by the Prussians to allow mission orders to work. Moltke wrote, "It has been vehemently asserted that the battle of Spicheren was fought in an ill-judged locality, and that it interfered with more important plans. It certainly had not been anticipated. But generally speaking, a tactical victory rarely fails to fit in with a strategic design. Success in battle has always been thankfully accepted, and turned to account."<sup>70</sup> By allowing Kameke the freedom to develop the tactical situation, Steinmetz and Moltke, gained an operational advantage by discovering the French's intentions of defending forward of the fortresses at Metz and Sedan. Either senior commander could have

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<sup>69</sup>Moltke, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 21, 23-24.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

ordered Kameke to disengage, wait for reinforcements, or even withdraw so that the army could reform to execute Moltke's original plan. The commanders risked the loss of an entire division once they realized that Kameke was fighting a corps without reinforcements. However, both men realized the opportunity that could be gained by Kameke's initiative by forcing the French to change their plans. His actions fit within the overall intent of Moltke's orders to find and engage the enemy. As such, they allowed the battle to progress. In the case of Spicheren, success resulted from the independent actions of corps and division commanders that understood the situation and coordinated their actions, without orders, to accomplish Moltke's intent.

### **Mars-la-Tour-Gravelotte**

The battles of the first week, Weissenburg and Spicheren gained the Prussians an enormous tactical advantage, albeit at a cost of nearly 50,000 casualties. Moltke realized that even by mobilizing units still in Prussia, the kingdom would not be able to sustain comparable casualties for long.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, the three Prussian armies had succeeded in initially defending the frontier and had then wrested the initiative from the French. Napoleon III's armies had remained static after their brief sortie across the Saar River. Because of their new advanced positions, the Prussians had positional advantage over the remaining French armies. Moltke knew that he could defeat a significant portion of the Army of the Rhine by trapping it near Metz. Amazingly, the French commanders did not realize their poor positions until it was almost too late.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 63. Detailed accounting using the numbers provided in the German official records puts the number closer to 22,000. It seems that Moltke might have included the casualties from Mars-la-Tour and Gravelotte battles when he wrote this entry.

<sup>72</sup>Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 135-41.



the plan seemed to be working. The First Army engaged the portions of the French army on 15 August and pushed them back into Metz. Unfortunately for the Prussians, Bazaine realized the same day that his force needed to retreat towards Verdun to retain its maneuverability. Moltke issued orders for the Second Army to change its line of march from the west to the north in order to attack the French Army on the western portion of Metz, where rail lines might aid the French withdrawal. He intended for Second Army to delay Bazaine's soldiers long enough for the First Army to improve its position. Moltke gave Prince Frederick Karl an enormous amount of latitude stating, "It is left to the Second Army to do this all available means according to its own judgment."<sup>74</sup> On 16 August, Prince Frederick Karl issued orders for the Second Army to reiterating Moltke's intent.

When the French started their retreat towards Paris, only one Prussian unit was in position to gain and maintain contact with the enemy. Gen. Konstantin von Alvensleben's III Corps, the vanguard of Second Army, had already crossed the Moselle River; his reconnaissance elements had identified that the French were moving west out of Metz.<sup>75</sup> Alvensleben thought he was attacking the French rearguard, and that by immediately attacking, III Corps could slow the French movement. His actions might allow the other two Prussian corps time to get in place.<sup>76</sup> Instead, his corps attacked the entire French Army of the Rhine near Mars-la-Tour. Alvensleben wrote about his decision to engage the enemy.

As on the 15th, so again the entire strategic aspect of the campaign came before my eyes in full clearness and I was certain that the situation justified me in inserting my entire army corps. Of the X Corps, I thought only insofar as offering me a supporting point to

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<sup>74</sup>Headquarters, Second Army, *The Campaign of 1870-71: Operations of the Second Army from the Opening of the Campaign to the Capitulation of Metz*, comp. Captain von der Goltz (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Son, 1873), 50.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>76</sup>German General Staff, *Headquarters, Third Army Corps, at the Battle of Vionville – Mars la Tour*, trans. Harry Bell (1895; repr., Fort Leavenworth: CGSC, 1912), 28-30.

fall back on, if I hazarded a battle with superior hostile forces and that with an inverted front. I did not know if the X Corps could or would give me any support, but I knew that, considering the direction of the retreat, it was immaterial to us if our object should be attained eight miles further to the front or rear; and I also knew that with each step backward I gained the time and power the enemy lost. The hazard, viewed in more detail, was consequently not too large or too dangerous. It would have been very, very unfortunate and bitter, to leave the battlefield with our wounded to the enemy, but this was of no influence at all on the objective of our day's task.<sup>77</sup>

Alvensleben's rationale for attacking the French Army, even after he had discovered the size of the force arrayed against him, demonstrated a remarkable analysis of the risk he incurred to pursue Moltke's intent. Even though he could not count on X Corps' cooperation during the battle, Alvensleben knew he had the ability to withdraw toward friendly forces. In this case, Alvensleben believed the Prussians could gain a tactical, and strategic, advantage through his initiative.

Once Alvensleben ordered his units into action against the French, the Battle of Mars-la-Tour on 16 August followed the pattern set at Weissenburg and Spicheren with one exception. At Mars-la-Tour, the Prussian III Corps was too small to find the French flank and turn it, as the Prussians had done at Weissenburg and Spicheren. The Prussians initially committed a small number of forces to the battle, only the 5th Infantry Division, and then allowed the situation to develop. Amazingly, the soldiers of III Corps, with only two reinforcement divisions from X Corps, fought the entire French Army to a draw over the course of the day. The Prussians equalized the fight by using their artillery, as they eventually massed over 130 pieces to support their infantry attacks.

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 35-36.

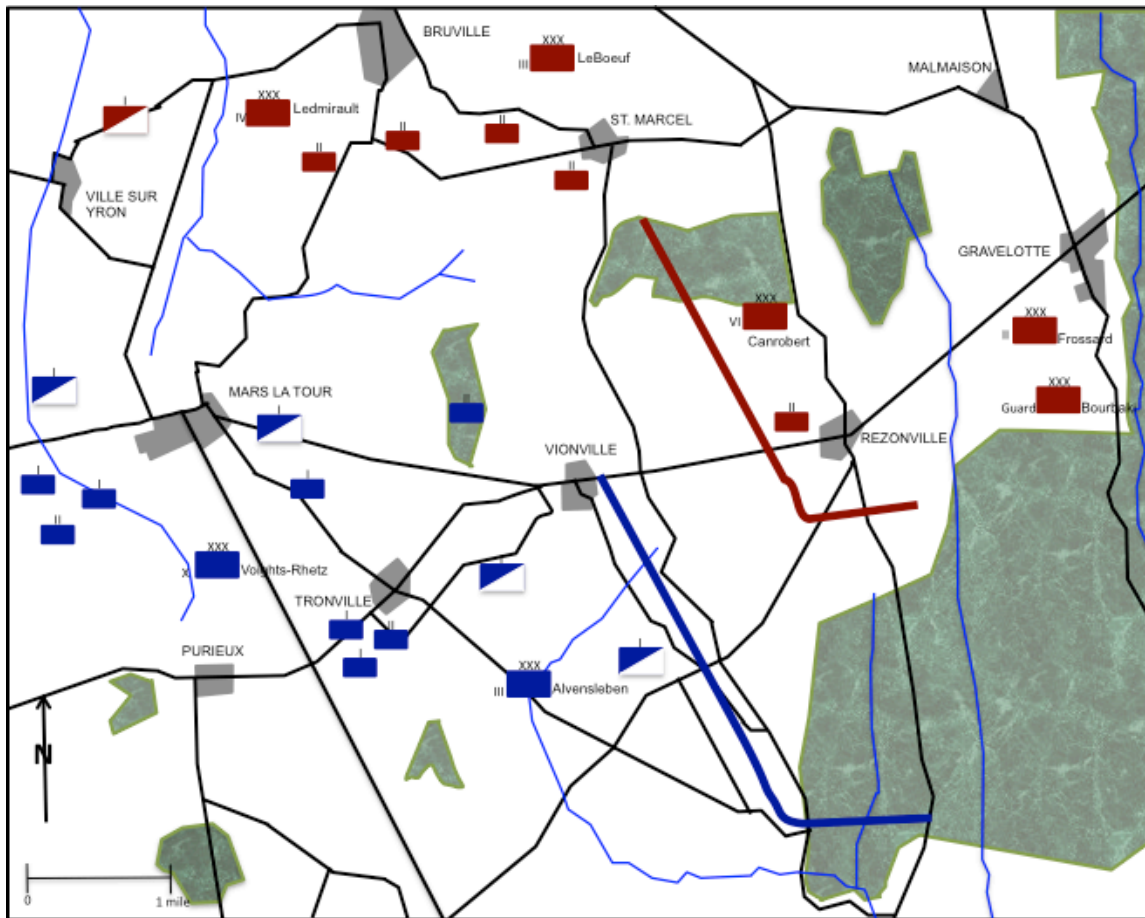


Figure 8. The Battle of Mars-la-Tour

*Source:* Created by author

However, at 1400, Alvensleben found his corps in a precarious position. With all of reserves already committed and the closest Prussian unit an hour away, he planned the withdrawal of his forces. He received reports that the French cavalry, supported by the VI Corps artillery, was massing to counterattack his 6th Infantry Division. Alvensleben, hoping to deceive Bazaine as to his true strength, ordered the 12th Cavalry Division, to charge the French artillery. This cavalry charge, under the command of Maj. Gen. Friedrich Wilhelm von Bredow, gained immediate fame in the Prussian Army as an example of bravery, sacrifice, and duty in the face of a superior enemy. The 7th Cuirassiers, 16th Uhlans, and 19th Dragoons, charged nearly 1,000

meters into the French guns. Their advance scattered the French gunners, and the panicked infantry guarding the guns fired into the French cavalry as they prepared to countercharge.<sup>78</sup> The brigade lost 420 of the 800 cavalymen that made the charge, including Chancellor Bismarck's son. Alvensleben's deception succeeded.<sup>79</sup> As the Prussian infantry closed the distance between the two lines in the early twilight, the advance set off a general panic in the French VI Corps.

The Prussians won a significant, albeit costly, victory, at Mars-la-Tour. Symbolically, the Prussians possessed the battlefield after the French finished their withdrawal back in the direction of Metz. The true victory, however, was not immediately apparent. Strategically the battle was clearly a Prussian victory because Alvensleben had delayed the French withdrawal long enough for the Prussians to block the road to Verdun. The casualties on both sides were nearly equal, 15,590 Prussians, including nearly 7,000 soldier's from Alvensleben's III Corps, to 16,128 French.<sup>80</sup> General Verdy, a member of Moltke's general staff, recognized that the Prussians needed to capitalize on the initiative gained with so much blood by continuing the attack as soon as possible.<sup>81</sup>

Two days later, the Prussian and French armies fought a significantly different battle on nearly the same ground. The Battle of Gravelotte-St. Privat differed from the previous battles simply because both armies massed the majority of their forces for the first time. When the smoke cleared on the battlefield that night, over 188,300 Germans and 112,800 French soldiers had fought head-to-head in the largest battle of the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>82</sup> Moltke still wanted the

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 57-61.

<sup>79</sup>Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 151.

<sup>80</sup>*Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 1:421, Appendix 21; *Third Army Corps, at the Battle of Vionville – Mars la Tour*, 95.

<sup>81</sup>Verdy, *With the Royal Headquarters*, 72.

<sup>82</sup>Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 167.

Prussian army to execute an envelopment of Bazaine's army in vicinity of Metz, while Bazaine tried to consolidate his position for a chance to breakout to the west. However, the Prussians lacked a good intelligence on what they faced. Most of the cavalry was still reorganizing after the Battle of Mars-la-Tour and had not conducted significant reconnaissance to find Bazaine's army. As a result, Moltke and the entire Prussian army entered the Battle of Gravelotte blind.

The Prussian orders of the day followed the pattern set in the earlier battles. Moltke's original orders called for the First and Second Armies to identify the French flanks and to attack once they were identified. Prince Frederick Karl's orders to his army simply read, "Set out tomorrow morning towards the north to locate the enemy and fight him."<sup>83</sup> The battle did not progress as simply as the orders read.

On 18 August, Moltke believed that the Prussian forces could win the decisive victory he sought if all of the Prussians could get into position prior to the start of the battle. His plan required the Prussian army to press along the entire front of the French army to prevent Bazaine from reinforcing the points of attack. The plan unraveled quickly. Without a good reconnaissance presence, Prince Frederick Karl's units could not locate the flank of Bazaine's position. Artillery nominally assigned to Steinmetz, although really under Moltke's control, started firing on French line prematurely. Moltke tried to calm the situation and dispatched orders to Steinmetz urging patience.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Wolfgang Foerster, *Prinz Friedrich Karl von Preussen: Denkwürdigkeiten aus seinem Leben*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Dt. Verlag-Anst., 1910), 225.

<sup>84</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 2:19; Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 170.

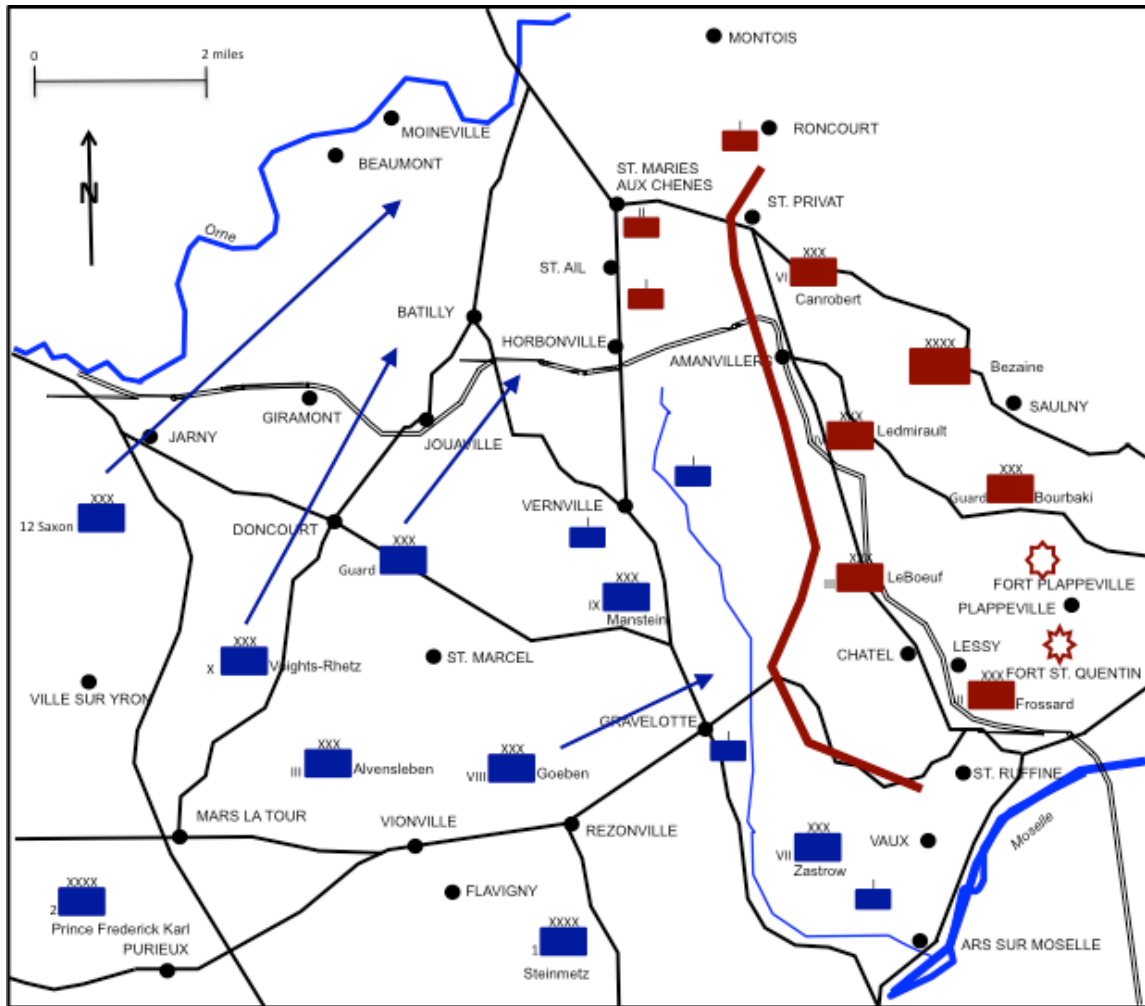


Figure 9. The Battle of Gravelotte, Situation at 0900

*Source:* Created by author

Thirty minutes after he received Moltke's orders, Steinmetz, concerned that small formation of French soldiers in front of him was consolidating their position, seized the initiative and ordered his VIII Corps to attack the French position at St. Hubert. A ravine in front of the position proved too great an obstacle for the Prussian infantry or cavalry to overcome. Nonetheless, Steinmetz pressed his attacks through the ravine. First Army's commanders' performance in the battle bordered on terrible. They initiated a battle that Moltke and the Prussian Army were not ready to prosecute. Over the course of the day Steinmetz continued to reinforce

his failure at the Mance Ravine. Steinmetz fed his units into the battle piecemeal as they arrived on the battlefield in the hope of gaining the initiative. At one point, command and control broke down to the point that an ad hoc organization of 43 intermixed companies from seven different regiments stood ready to attack the French strongpoint at St. Hubert, but the subordinate commanders could not coordinate their movement effectively as they had in previous battles.<sup>85</sup> There is no evidence that one of the subordinate corps or division commanders tried to exercise initiative or to question the wisdom of repeatedly attacking up the steep bank. Steinmetz committed his reserve early in the battle, and he requested from the king command of Gen. Eduard Friedrich Karl von Fransecky's II Corps from Second Army. Steinmetz convinced the king that the battle at the Mance Ravine could be won with these soldiers. Poor reports coming back from the front lines had led Steinmetz to believe this was the case. The attack failed terribly until the arrival of II Corps' 4th Infantry Division at 2000 could stabilize the Prussian flank.<sup>86</sup> The French failure to counterattack was the only highlight of the battle in Steinmetz's sector.

Steinmetz's performance during the battle nearly led to his dismissal. The reports from his portion of the line were so confusing that no one really understood the tactical situation. The king moved the Royal Headquarters into Gravelotte during the battle so that he and Moltke could gain a better understanding of the battle by shortening the time it took to receive reports. Gen. Philip Sheridan, a US observer attached to the Royal Headquarters, described Steinmetz's meeting with the king at the headquarters in Gravelotte during the battle. The king summoned Steinmetz to explain his actions during the first few hours of the battle. Sheridan believed that Wilhelm would relieve Steinmetz on the spot for incompetence. The two commanders spoke for a while, during which the king's demeanor softened, and Steinmetz returned to command his army

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<sup>85</sup>Fritz Hönig, *24 Hours of Moltke's Strategy* (1891; repr., Woolwich: The Royal Artillery Institution, 1895), 127.

<sup>86</sup>Verdy, *With the Royal Headquarters*, 84-85.

for the rest of the battle. Sheridan, although not privy to the conversation, believed that Wilhelm overlooked Steinmetz's fault once he explained his actions.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile at the north end of the Prussian line, Prince Frederick Karl committed the greatest tactical blunder of the battle. He ordered his soldiers into the attack as soon as he heard the Prussian guns to the south. Frederick Karl's soldiers also directly attacked a French strongpoint guarded by a steep embankment. He next ordered the Prussian Guards Corps into action against the French line without ensuring that the supporting artillery was in place to support its advance. They ultimately seized the high ground. As a result, the elite of the Prussian Army heroically threw itself against the French line, exposed to massed rifle fire. However, the elite of the Prussian army, the Guards effectively ceased to exist a fighting unit after repeatedly attacking directly up the heights near Amanvillers and St. Privat. The Guards officer corps took an especially high number of casualties, of the 899 Prussian officers killed or wounded in the battle, 308 belonged to the Guards. The disproportionate number of casualties in Guards occurred because the leaders exposed themselves as they urged their men to move on the French positions without the benefit of covering artillery fire.<sup>88</sup> Once again the French failed to counterattack, and instead withdrew.

Ultimately, the Battle of Gravelotte was a great Prussian victory, although Moltke and the king were not aware of it until the next morning when the Prussian scouted of the French positions. They confirmed that the Army of the Rhine had withdrawn in the direction of Metz. Tactically, the battle was a draw at best. The combined German forces lost 20,163 soldiers killed,

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<sup>87</sup>Philip S. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1888), 373.

<sup>88</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871*, 2:Appendix 24. Moltke pointed out in his memoirs that the average loss of officers to soldiers ratio was 1:40, but the Prussians had suffered a 1:23 ratio in the war so far. He attributed this to the fact Prussian leaders personally led their soldiers into battle. Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 63.

wounded, or missing, including 899 officers.<sup>89</sup> The French lost 7,855 killed, wounded, or missing, and an additional 4,420 men taken prisoner.<sup>90</sup>

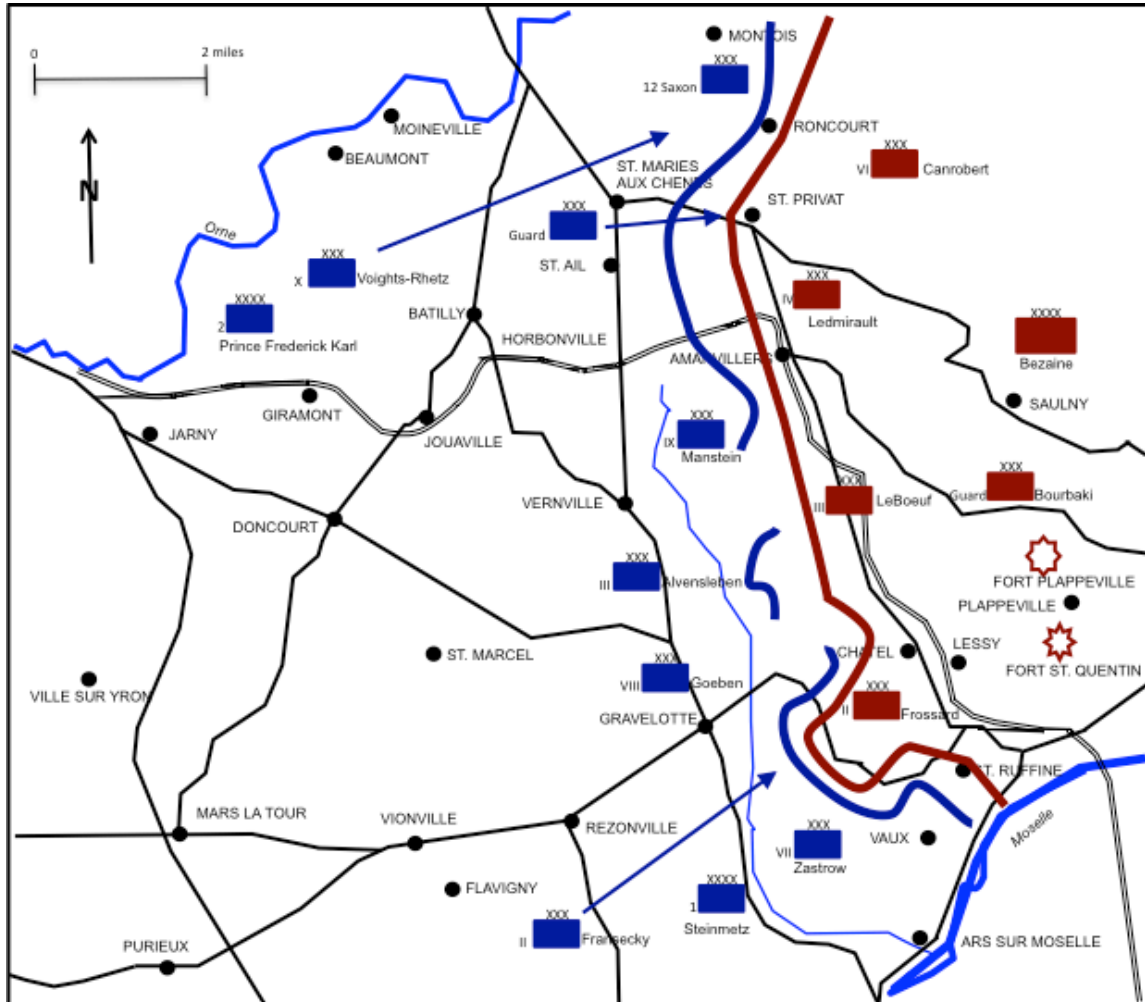


Figure 10. The Battle of Gravelotte, Situation at 2000

Source: Created by author

<sup>89</sup>German General Staff, *Franco-German War 1870-1871 2*:Appendix 24; Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 63.

<sup>90</sup>Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 181; German General Staff, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 62.

The Battle of Gravelotte appeared to demonstrate that the Prussian system of command could even absorb a disaster as great as the loss of the Prussian Guards and still achieve at least a tactical draw that favored the Prussian's strategic objectives. However, several parts of the battle demonstrated the failure of the directive orders, most notably Steinmetz's decision to attack before Prince Frederick Karl's units were in position. Instead of a unified effort against the French Army, the Prussian effort devolved into two separate battles, one in the north at St. Privat and one in the south at the Mance Ravine. Moltke could not gain control of either battle. The night of the battle the king learned of his Guard's Corps for little to no gain. Supposedly, the king vowed to bivouac with his soldiers on the battlefield as penance for overseeing such a poorly executed battle. Witnesses claim that Moltke rode forward to better influence the battle, and that he personally berated himself for not doing more to avoid the slaughter.<sup>91</sup> The Battle of Gravelotte was one of the only times that Moltke would suggest that had he been on the battlefield he would have conducted the battle differently and exercised greater restraint.<sup>92</sup> It is unlikely that Moltke could have assumed command of the battle since most of the principle commanders belonged to the nobility. He lacked the ability to relieve a commander since they commanded with the consent of the king.

After the Battle of Gravelotte, Marshal Bazaine's French forces retreated into the defensive lines at the fortress town of Metz. The Prussian Second Army laid siege to the city, while the Third Army intercepted and defeated Marshal MacMahon's Army of Châlons at the Battle of Sedan. The Prussians captured Napoleon III at Sedan, which led to the collapse of the Second Empire on 4 September. With no chance of relief or escape, Bazaine's Army of the Rhine surrendered on 27 October 1870. The war managed to drag on for another five months, but

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<sup>91</sup>Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 184-185; Verdy, *With the Royal Headquarters*, 88-92.

<sup>92</sup>Moltke, *Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871*, 58.

Bismarck realized his objective a unified Germany at the Palace of Versailles on 18 January 1871.

Ultimately, Steinmetz lost his command shortly after the Battle of Gravelotte when Moltke reorganized the army to facilitate the siege of Bazaine's Army and to intercept MacMahon's new army. However, neither his tactical ineptitude nor his blind initiative cost him his command. Instead, he refused to subordinate himself and his command to the Crown Prince, a younger officer, after Moltke's reorganization of the army during the siege of Metz. The king viewed this as a slight against the royal family. Steinmetz was relieved, forced to sing the national anthem as a sign of allegiance, and sent home to serve as the governor-general of the V and VI Army Corps districts in Posen.<sup>93</sup> There is little doubt that Moltke, Bismarck, and the king viewed Steinmetz as an unimaginative commander that often required more attention and more direct orders than the other army commanders to curb his initiative. However, the rationale for his relief was important, in that he was not relieved for showing initiative, making tactical mistakes, or attempting to destroy the enemy. His sudden departure did not send a message through the Prussian command that failure could result in dismissal. Every officer knew that a slight against the crown was an offense. His relief is not even mentioned in Moltke's memoirs, correspondence, nor in the German official history. After the war, Steinmetz was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal, but Wilhelm I personally intervened to prevent Steinmetz from publishing his memoirs after the war. As such, his point of view during the Battle of Gravelotte and the preceding campaign was not preserved for later analysis.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 190-91; Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 291; Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 194.

<sup>94</sup>The Steinmetz family papers were published at the beginning of the twentieth century; however, they contain no details on Steinmetz's point of view regarding his relief and reassignment.

## ***Auftragstaktik* in US Army Doctrine**

Despite the mixed successes of directive command in the first few weeks of August 1870, the Prussians continued to use it throughout the rest of the war. Moltke continued to refine his *Direktiven* doctrine after the war. Not everyone agreed that it worked. The US Army saw no use for German system of command and control. General Sheridan submitted a report to President Ulysses S. Grant stating:

I saw no new military principles developed, whether of strategy or grand tactics, the movements of different armies and corps being dictated and governed by the same general laws that have so long obtained simplicity of combination and maneuver, and the concentration of a numerically superior force at the vital point.<sup>95</sup>

In 1874, Brevet Maj. Gen. Emory Upton initially came to the same conclusion. His analysis of the war produced no lessons that the US Army should incorporate into its new tactical doctrine.<sup>96</sup> However when Upton visited Berlin in 1876, his view changed. He observed that a small, but educated officer corps served as the backbone of Germany's army. The professional school system enabled it to develop a general staff capable of executing complex tactical problems.<sup>97</sup> He set to work on revising US tactical doctrine to reflect the German system. Upton's suicide in March 1881 allowed another school of thought under Lt. John Bigelow and Capt. Arthur Wagner to undercut the incorporation of German thought in the development of future doctrine.

Bigelow and Wagner did not believe that the US Army could learn from Prussian wars of unification. They wrote extensively about the tactical errors committed by Prussian commanders in the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War. In both 1866 and 1870-1871, the German armies suffered more casualties than their enemy. Even Moltke and the German General

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<sup>95</sup>Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:451-52.

<sup>96</sup>Stephen Ambrose, *Upton and the Army* (1964; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 76-79.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, 88-98.

Staff acknowledged that the Prussians could have executed certain aspects of the wars better, but they did not conclude whether executing the war through the use of direct orders would have reduced the number of casualties on each side. The US officers disregarded the fact that in both instances, Prussia defeated a larger enemy force in the defense in less than a year. Additionally, they correctly identified that US Army had started to use a system of directives during the American Civil War, primarily between Grant and Sherman, but also out west.<sup>98</sup> The difference between the US system and the Prussian system is simple. The Prussians indoctrinated the concept of pursuing the commander's intent with independence to decide of the best method to achieve that objective. This belief started with an officer's education at the *Kriegsakademie* and the General Staff. Wagner failed to understand the importance of systemic military education to Germany's ability to conduct maneuvers based on directives, whereas the American system relied on personalities or conditions to force the use of directives.<sup>99</sup>

Although the Germans continuously subscribed to the idea of *Auftragstaktik* through most of the two world wars and the early Cold War, the United States Army did not formally adopt the idea of directive control until the 1986 version of FM 100-5, *Operations*. Lt. Col. Charles Suttan, a student at the US Army War College in 1986, attributed its incorporation into the manual, as directive control, to Art of War Colloquiums at the War College starting in 1979. During the interviews former German World War II commanders attributed their successes to the

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<sup>98</sup>John Bigelow, *Mars-La-Tour and Gravelotte* (Washington, DC: United States Army Ordnance Department, 1884), 64-65; Arthur L. Wagner, *The Campaign of Königgrätz, A Study of the Austro-Prussian Conflict in the Light of the American Civil War* (Fort Leavenworth: C. J. Smith & Company, 1889), 71-73, 99-100.

<sup>99</sup>Wagner never came to appreciate the German educational system. However, his successor, Capt. Eben Swift, did appreciate the German system and oversaw the adoption of several German-influenced textbooks at Fort Leavenworth. Michael R. Matheny, *Carrying the War to the Enemy: American Operational Art to 1945* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 21-24. The US Army's use of flying column in the West during the Indian Wars is one of the best examples of *Auftragstaktik* in the United States. However, this method of command and control failed to be captured in doctrine and promptly disappeared once the Indians were defeated. See Robert Utley's *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) for more detailed use of the flying columns in the American West.

incorporation of *Auftragstaktik* within their commands.<sup>100</sup> These commanders even accepted the idea that subordinates could fail at tactical level. Gen. Hermann Balck, an army group commander and veteran of both world wars, stated that “Generally the German higher commander rarely or never reproached their subordinate unless they made a terrible blunder. They were fostering individual initiative. They left him room for initiative, and did not reprimand him unless he did something very wrong.”<sup>101</sup> The army, however, did not concur with General Balck in 1980. For most of the Cold War, the US Army moved closer to centralized command than decentralized command due to the influence of Gen. William DePuy.

After Vietnam, the US Army considered writing a new doctrine that reflected the realities of large-unit operations in the Cold War, the development of an all-volunteer force, and the poor state of training of the US Army. In July 1973, Gen. Creighton Abrams chose DePuy to lead the effort as the commander of the newly created Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). DePuy believed that soldiers lacked initiative, discipline, and education, and the Army’s new doctrine needed to reflect that assumption. In fairness to DePuy, his experiences in Vietnam as division commander and staff officer probably confirmed his belief. Moreover, the post-Vietnam army had problems with drugs, desertion, and a lack of professionally trained noncommissioned officers. The army still had worldwide commitments to fulfill as part of the larger containment of communism, but it had to meet these requirements without the draft. DePuy believed that soldiers and junior leaders needed to be told what to think, not how to think, and that reliance on doctrine and battle drills could produce a force that could win in Europe.<sup>102</sup> During his tenure, the Army

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<sup>100</sup>Charles G. Suttan, Jr., “Command and Control at the Operational Level,” *Parameters* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 18.

<sup>101</sup>General Hermann Balck, interview; “Generals Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics: Implications for NATO Military Doctrine” *Art of War Colloquium* (1980; repr., Carlisle: US Army War College, April 1983), 17.

<sup>102</sup>“Briefing by Lt. Gen. DePuy, 7 June 1973, Ft. Polk, Louisiana” *Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy*, ed. Richard Swain (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1994), 60-62.

developed the first FM 100-5, *Operations*, in 1976, which actually moved the Army away from mission orders by standardizing training, battle drills, doctrine, and evaluations. Ironically, he believed that he was implementing a German culture of training within the US Army, although it probably reflected an army closer to Frederick the Great's than Moltke's.

The 1976 edition of *Operations* mentioned "mission-type" orders briefly in Chapter Three, "How We Fight." The mission-type orders could allow flexibility within a plan for a subordinate to accomplish the mission within the commander's intent. Under the subheading of "Leadership," DePuy even wrote that "decentralization of responsibility and authority" was strength of the current force. However, it also seems that he envisioned this system of command to take over when communications between headquarters failed.<sup>103</sup> Despite this nod to idea of *Auftragstaktik*, the rest of manual does little to suggest that DePuy actually believed in these concepts. The manual focused primarily on the technical aspects of weapons systems, not soldiers' and commanders' management of those weapons systems. The manual's content suggested that the commander who masters the employment of tanks, infantry, and artillery pieces better than his opponent would win the battle. In the defense, brigade commanders should expect to move company-teams from individual battle positions to maximize lethality.<sup>104</sup> This hardly evoked the spirit of the Prussians in 1870-1871, when leaders and their soldiers exercised initiative in the face of the technically superior Chassepot rifle and *mitrailleuse* machine cannon. Chapter Three also listed four prerequisites for victory on the battlefield, adequate forces and weapons concentrated at the decisive point, control and direction to mass weapons effects, the use of cover, concealment, suppression, and combined arms, and crews trained to use their weapons systems.<sup>105</sup> Command, vision, and initiative were not listed.

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<sup>103</sup>FM 100-5 (1976), 3-2.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 3-9 – 3-10.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 3-3.

In the early 1980s, the US Army seemed poised to make a major change in how it commanded and controlled large units. Many of the DePuy's critics argued that his restrictive methods no longer applied to a post-Vietnam War army striving for professionalism. Junior leaders resented a capstone manual written on the premise that they lacked the ability to think on the battlefield. In 1984, West Point conducted a survey of 23,000 company- and field-grade officers to determine their current perceptions of the organization's leadership. Nearly 49 percent of the surveyed officers responded that, "the bold, original, creative officer cannot survive in today's Army."<sup>106</sup> Gen. Donald Starry, DePuy's successor at TRADOC, concurred with these leaders and started to rollback DePuy's mechanical approach to the training and employment of the forces that emphasized firepower over maneuverability.<sup>107</sup>

In between the 1976 and the 1986 editions of FM 100-5, officers in US Army debated the relevance of *Auftragstaktik* in a modern army. A survey of the articles written in the Army's two professional journals, *Military Review* and *Parameters*, indicated that officers agreed that the Army's system of leadership, command, and control did not maximize the talents of junior officers. Lt. Col. Huba Wass de Czege, the founder of the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, argued that the 1976 doctrine could not beat the Soviets because it forfeited initiative and maneuver in favor of the defense.<sup>108</sup> Other explanations for discrepancy differed, with some officers pointing to organization reasons and others to cultural explanations.<sup>109</sup> Most of

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<sup>106</sup>Benjamin Schemmer, "Internal Army Surveys Suggest Serious Concerns About Army's Senior Leaders," *Armed Forces Journal International*, 122 (May 1985): 18-19.

<sup>107</sup>Walter E. Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine: From the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011), 202-05.

<sup>108</sup>Huba Wass de Czege and L. D. Holder, "The New FM 100-5," *Military Review* 62, no. 7 (July 1982): 53-54.

<sup>109</sup>Sutten argued that the doctrine was broken because Fort Leavenworth was the proponent for command and control, while Fort Benning wrote the leadership doctrine. The two organizations focused on different areas. Nelsen argued that the leaders did not allow subordinates enough latitude to exercise initiative because mistakes reflected poorly on the command. Sutten, "Command and Control at the Operational Level," 20; Nelson, "Auftragstaktik", 31-32.

the officers agreed that the German system offered the best alternative to the current system, and they started to affect change in the Army's doctrine.<sup>110</sup> The 1982 edition of FM 100-5 was the first manual to incorporate the doctrine that resembled the idea of *Auftragstaktik*; however, the idea took expanded and took root with the 1986 edition of *Operations*.

In 1986, the US Army adopted mission orders in FM 100-5 and maintained several of Moltke's original *Auftragstaktik* tenets for AirLand Battle. The "Command and Control" section of the manual called for commanders to give subordinates the maximum amount of flexibility on the battlefield. Commanders gave subordinates an initial plan for an operation, but they had to expect subordinates to deviate from the original plan once battlefield conditions started to change. In some aspects, the 1986 edition improved on Moltke's *Instructions* and at other times reflected the strict training focus of DePuy's time. It stressed the importance standard operating procedures, warning orders, and maximum cooperation between units. At the same time, DePuy's influence is seen in the call for war gaming, rehearsals, and standardized, realistic training.<sup>111</sup>

In the 1993 version of FM 100-5, the influence of *Auftragstaktik* is slightly more apparent than it was in 1986. The manual continued the move away from the centralized direct and control of the 1976 manual to the modern concept of command and control. For the first time, the manual called for commanders to exert the "willingness and ability to act independently within the framework of the commander's intent."<sup>112</sup> The inclusion of the concept of independent thinking is one of the most important aspects of the US Army's move to decentralized command and control. Junior commanders could exert initiative and original thinking to solve complex problems on the

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<sup>110</sup>The dissenting voices during this period argued primarily that the German system had baggage from *Wehrmacht* abuses World War II that would meet institutional resistance. Roger A. Beaumont, "On the *Wehrmacht* Mystique," *Military Review* 66, no. 7 (July 1986): 48; Daniel Hughes, "Abuses of German Military History," *Military Review* 66, no. 12 (December 1986): 66-76.

<sup>111</sup>FM 100-5 (1986), 21-22.

<sup>112</sup>FM 100-5 (1993), 2-6.

battlefield. Today an officer in the US Army might believe that the mission command and *Auftragstaktik* are synonymous terms.

## **Limitations of *Auftragstaktik* on the Modern Battlefield**

The modern battlefield could limit the influence of *Auftragstaktik* on military operations. Historian Robert Citino has argued in *The German Way of War* that no modern army could claim *Auftragstaktik* as the basis for its method of command and control for this very reason. To illustrate his point, he proposed a hypothetical situation during Operation Desert Storm that mirrored Steinmetz's maneuver into the flank of the Second Army prior to Battle of Spicheren. Citino argued that scenario is nearly impossible because of modern command, control, and communications equipment. Even if a technology blackout had allowed the scenario to occur, under no circumstances could the corps commander explain away his division commander's flanking maneuver into a friendly unit the way Moltke explained away Steinmetz's maneuver.<sup>113</sup> Unmanned aerial vehicles, GPS tracking down to the individual soldier level, and better communication platforms have reduced the amount of time it takes for commanders to gain understanding, visualize the battlefield, direct and lead subordinates, and assess tactical actions.

Arguably, the problem of commanders exerting too much oversight of their subordinate commanders is not unique to 21st century battlefield. During the Battle of Champion Hill during the 1863 Vicksburg campaign, Brig. Gen. John M. Logan had both the corps commander and the army commander immediately behind his brigade during its attack.<sup>114</sup> The American Civil War ended only one year before the Austro-Prussian War, and five years before the Franco-Prussian War. Both the American and Prussian experiences featured large armies moving on multiple routes to arrive at the point of decision. In Vietnam, company commanders could routinely look

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<sup>113</sup>Citino, *The German Way of War*, 310-311.

<sup>114</sup>Timothy B. Smith, *Champion Hill: Decisive Battle for Vicksburg* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2004), 288.

up during a firefight to see the battalion commander, brigade commander, division commander, and sometimes even the corps commanders' helicopters orbiting the battlefield. The commander on the ground could expect guidance, sometimes conflicting, from each echelon of command.<sup>115</sup> In retrospect, these examples are not very different from today's battlefield. In fact, the primary difference between the three scenarios is merely the proximity of the commander to the battlefield, which could be attributed to the method of communications between the leader and subordinate.

However, the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that lower level leaders still can and do execute operations without the prying eyes of a higher commander. In May 2006, then Col. Sean MacFarland was given broad command guidance when his 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division moved into Ramadi, Iraq. At a time when most of the coalition was consolidating on larger bases, MacFarland's battalions were occupying new positions. Furthermore, since he was operating in Al-Anbar Province, to the west and away from the main fight in Baghdad, his rapprochement with previously hostile Sunni sheikhs went largely unnoticed. MacFarland's operations in Ramadi came at a price; his brigade had 95 soldiers killed and nearly 600 wounded.<sup>116</sup> MacFarland's case might be an extreme example, but 1st Brigade's experience in Ramadi demonstrated that subordinate commanders do still maintain a degree of freedom to execute operations within the higher commander's intent but adopting the method of execution to the local situation. Furthermore, it does demonstrate that the practice of *Auftragstaktik* can survive on the modern, information-heavy battlefield.

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<sup>115</sup>Dave Palmer, *Summon of the Trumpet, US-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press 1978), 142.

<sup>116</sup>Jim Michaels, "An Army Colonel's Gamble Pays off in Iraq" *USA Today* (1 May 2007); Niel Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point." *Military Review* 88: 2 (March-April 2008): 41-52.

## Conclusion

The Prussian concept of the *Auftragstaktik* is incorporated throughout the US Army's mission command model. The Army expects leaders to give their subordinates maximum freedom for execution, and in return, leaders expect their subordinates execute the mission within their intent. Moltke's influence from his *Instructions* is evident throughout the mission command model. The six guiding principles of mission command contained within ADP 6-0 acknowledge the essence of the German system. The doctrine illustrates that mission command is a balance between science of control and the art of command, as well as a balance between the subordinate's initiative and operational risk. Alvensleben's analysis before committing his division to the Battle of Mars-la-Tour showed an appreciation for this balance. The current doctrine stresses the importance of commanders talking among themselves and the commander to build a common understanding. The Prussian soldiers entering the battle of Weissenburg understood where the Bavarians perceived that they were weak and effectively reinforced the units fighting the French. When this system is working well the senior commander hardly needs to interfere in the conduct of the battle, as was the case with the Crown Prince. Finally, the US Army's doctrine suggests the use of mission orders. Although the Prussian use of mission orders did not always work, the frontier battles of the Franco-Prussian War demonstrated their potential of overwhelming an enemy cognitively and physically.

The US Army ignored or was ignorant of some of the cultural nuances that uniquely applied to Prussia and Germany in the last half of the nineteenth-century as it pursued the concept during the early 1980s. The Prussian leaders belonged to a culture that accepted blind followership. The *Junker* class officers knew that the king could not maintain his power in Prussia without their support. Although revolution never seemed an imminent threat, a precarious balance existed since before Frederick the Great's time. German soldiers, unlike their French

counterparts, did not question being ordered to attack against overwhelming odds. The German soldier had only recently gained the rights that could have allowed him to do it.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the increased reliance on instantaneous and redundant communications technology, real-time video, and precision munitions have not significantly changed the mission command environment. The Prussians commanders had more latitude to demonstrate initiative than their American counterparts during the second-half of the twentieth-century. Even now as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated, commanders are given freedom to execute the intent rather than the letter of the orders in pursuit of a common objective.

With the publication of the 2012 edition of ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, the German concept of the *Auftragstaktik* is incorporated throughout the US Army's mission command model. At least on paper, the Army expects leaders to give their subordinates maximum freedom for execution, and in return, leaders expect their subordinates execute the mission within their intent. The new doctrine captures the essence of Moltke's system better than any previous version, since the Army adopted mission orders in 1986. Mission command's six guiding principles provide the best logical bridge between Moltke's doctrine at the onset of the Franco-Prussian War and the current US Army's mission command doctrine.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Prussian and German Order of Battle – August 1870**

Commander: King Wilhelm I of Prussia

Chief of Staff: General Helmuth von Moltke

First Army: General Steinmetz

I Corps: General Edwin Freiherr von Manteuffel

VII Corps: General Heinrich von Zastrow

VIII Corps: General August Karl von Goeben

Second Army: Prince Frederick Karl

Guards Corps: Prince Frederick Karl

II Corps: General Eduard von Fransecky

III Corps: General Konstantin von Alvensleben

IV Corps: General Gustav von Alvensleben

IX Corps: General Albrecht Gustav von Manstein

X Corps: General Konstantin Bernhard von Voigts-Rhetz

XII Corps: Crown Prince of Saxony Albert (“Albert of Saxony”)

Reserve Cavalry

Third Army: Crown Prince Frederick Wilhelm

V Corps: Lt. General Hugo von Kirchbach

XI Corps: Lt. General Julius von Bose

I Bavarian Army Corps: General of Infantry Ludwig Freiherr von und zu der Tann-Rathsamhausen

II Bavarian Army Corps: General of Infantry Jakob von Hartmann

Württemberg Field Division: General Hugo von Obernitz

Baden Field Division: General Gustav Friedrich von Beyer

4th Cavalry Division: Prince Albrecht of Prussia

## **APPENDIX B**

### **French Order of Battle – August 1870**

Commander: Napoleon III

Chief of Staff: Marshal Edmond La Boeuf

Imperial Guard: General Charles Denis Bourbaki

First Corps: Marshal Patrice de MacMahon

Second Corps: General of the Division Charles Auguste Frossard

Third Corps: Marshal Francois Achille Bazaine

Fourth Corps: General of the Division Paul de Ladmirault

Fifth Corps: General of the Division Charles Failly

Sixth Corps: Marshal Francois Certain Canrobert

Seventh Corps: General of the Division Felix Douay.

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